

WILLARD, ELEANOR NICHOLL, Ph.D. A Culture of Persistence: Untold Stories of Degree Attainment from GED Earners in the Community College. (2016)
Directed by Dr. Leila Villaverde. 260 pp.

The purpose of this dissertation was to better understand under what conditions degree attainment takes place for GED recipients enrolled in the community college, and to research this question from the perspectives of the participants. To achieve this goal, I interviewed 13 participants who met the criteria to participate in this study, which was to have earned a GED or other alternative high school credential and to have graduated with an associate degree. Another objective of this study was to develop a grounded theory to explain how the participants were able to persist in attaining a postsecondary degree.

A theoretical model was developed that is grounded in the participants' experiences and depicts *a culture of persistence* as the central phenomenon. The four main categories or causal conditions found in the data were (a) interacting in the classroom, (b) participating in a multiplicity of support, (c) learning in a connected environment, and (d) experiencing freedom. Persistence is a process, and, as such, needs to be considered in its interconnectedness. These findings highlight the complex and interwoven ways in which the experiences in the classroom shape persistence. The participants felt the type of environment described by *a culture of persistence* aided them in completing their programs.

The intent of this study is to provide community college educators and administrators with a lens that is contradictory to the dominant narratives and assumptions concerning GED earners. Findings from this study have practical implications for those who wish to foster the success of GED earners enrolled in the

community college system. I suggest a number of imperatives for both administrators and educators that are based on the theoretical model.

A CULTURE OF PERSISTENCE: UNTOLD STORIES OF DEGREE ATTAINMENT
FROM GED EARNERS IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

Eleanor Nicholl Willard

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
2016

Approved by

Committee Chair

This dissertation is dedicated to the 13 amazing and inspiring participants in this study.
This body of work is also dedicated to my two beautiful, talented and loving children,
Cannon and Quinn, to my parents who have always loved me unconditionally and
supported me both emotionally and financially, and to my brilliant fiancé who has always
encouraged me and made me feel way more intelligent than I really am.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Eleanor Nicholl Willard, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair Leila E. VillaverdeCommittee Members Harvey S. Shapiro

Kimberly Kappler Hewitt

Brian J. Clarida

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people I want to thank. First and foremost, to my advisor and committee chair, Dr. Leila Villaverde, thank you for guiding me in this educational journey and being there for the long haul. Your genuine smile, your patience and your kindness, your feedback and your email winks gave me more motivation and inspiration than you could ever know and also sustained me in times when I felt like I didn't have what it takes to count myself among those in the academy. To all of my amazing professors in the ELC Department and especially my committee members, Dr. Kim Kappler Hewitt, Dr. Harvey S. Shapiro and Dr. Brian J. Clarida, thank you for your continued support and for sharing with me your immense knowledge and your passion for social justice. I am also extremely grateful for my ELC/Ph.D. classmates who finished this journey before me, especially Dr. Dawn Tafari and Dr. Cherese Childers-McKee, who were always willing to answer my constant questions and were more than happy to let me pick their beautiful brains, as well as to give me constructive criticism and food for thought.

I also want to express my sincere gratitude for my colleague, Stacy Jarrell, for her corresponding belief in the importance of creating a supportive, caring and socially just learning environment for our students, and for easily stepping into a leadership role while I was away in Greensboro over the past eight years. In addition, I want to thank each and every adjunct, past and present who share our same vision of the importance of equity, justice, and compassion for our students, especially Stephanie Whitlock-Dicken and

Charity Valentine who were more than willing to step up to the plate and do whatever was necessary during my absences. A special heartfelt thank you to both my current and previous bosses, Dr. Dan Mayo and Dr. Van Madray, for continuously supporting and encouraging me, and a great big thank you to all of my colleagues for constantly cheering me on through the dissertation process.

A special thank you to my mother, Barbara Nicholl, for instilling in me, as far back as I can remember, the importance of education and for your never-ending willingness to proofread this document for me just one more time. Thank you for teaching me more than I ever wanted to know about grammar and the English language and for helping me become a better writer. A significant thank you also goes to my father, Robert Nicholl, for always listening to me without *ever* interrupting, a trait I aspire to emulate, and for financially helping me through this process, as well as your willingness to spend numerous days and nights at home alone, while Mom was away at my house taking care of Cannon and Quinn, when I was either away in Greensboro or at a conference, or working on my dissertation.

To my children, Cannon and Quinn, thank you for never making me feel guilty when so many times I was missing from moments of the family vacation, or I missed one of your games, or I was locked away in my bedroom with the door shut either reading or writing. Thank you for your advanced understanding at such a young age that the sacrifices we have made now will be returned tenfold in the future. I also wish to thank Sally and Vance Averette who often took Quinn home from school, fed her, and took her

to soccer practice on the nights that I had to go to class, and to Nikki Levinson who so many times let Quinn spend both school nights and weekends with Samantha when I was away in Greensboro.

I must also acknowledge the contribution to this study of my fiancé Reavis Cameron who, like my participants, also made the decision to leave high school, yet is one of the most brilliant and phenomenal people I know. Your insight constantly awed me and inspired me, and I often wished I could explain things as profoundly and eloquently as you do. Thank you for loving me and supporting me, yet also pushing me to answer your incredibly challenging questions and to think outside the box; and thank you for being so understanding each time I had to put working on this dissertation before being able to spend my time with you.

Finally, an extra special thank you goes to all of my participants. You guys made this an amazing study. I am so appreciative of your willingness to give me your time and your brilliance. Thank you again for your participation. Each of you helped me to gain this Ph.D. credential and I am forever grateful!

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Need for the Study

Every year 1.3 million students drop out of high school. That's more than 7,200 students a day, or one student every 25 seconds (Wittenstein, 2010). Living in an era of standardized testing and standardized curriculum, where educational policies implement testing and punishing, the number of students dropping out is not surprising. Teaching to the test and high stakes testing “undermine not only the curiosity and investigative powers of the student but also deny the dialogic nature of knowledge production” (Saltman, 2009, p. 2). Furthermore, the irony of policies like “No Child Left Behind” and “Race to the Top” are that these policies create situations where many students cannot be successful and also only recognizes the students that are at the top. The ones in the middle and at the bottom are then considered to be those of the least worth and are often treated with contempt or even worse—avoidance. Sadly, positioning students as winners or losers places institutions into the very business of leaving kids behind (Shapiro, 2006).

Yet, despite oppressive school practices, policies and rules, almost two-thirds of the nearly 39 million adults that do not have a high school diploma will eventually gain some type of high school credential (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). The most common way students regain their education is through the acquisition of a General Educational Development equivalency, more commonly referred to as a GED. In fact, one out of

every 12 students has earned a high school equivalency credential in lieu of a traditional high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

More than 60% of GED Test takers say they intend to enroll in postsecondary education (Garvey & Grobe, 2011). Once enrolled, however, “only 30–35% obtains any postsecondary education, only 5–10% obtains at least a year of postsecondary education, and very few (between 0.5 and 3%) acquire even an associate degree” (Tyler, 2001, p. 42). Statistics such as these make one wonder why it is that such a small percentage of GED earners persist to the point of associate degree attainment.

As both a community college instructor and department chair, I was unaware of the role the GED played in enabling over 5% of my students (14 GED earners out of 260 total graduates, from 2001 to 2016) to continue their education in higher education and complete their associate degree. Until I began this dissertation, I did not know if any of my students had used the GED for acceptance into our college. We are not notified as to whether our students gain acceptance into the college with a traditional high school diploma or if they were homeschooled or if they earned their GED or other high school equivalency credential. Looking deeper at the overall number of GED earners, I found that these fourteen students were part of a total of thirty GED credentialed students that had enrolled in the graphic design program. I define enrollment in the program as entering GRD 141: Graphic Design I. This meant 46% of the GED earners enrolled in the Advertising & Graphic Design (AGD) curriculum completed their degree. While 46% isn’t ideal, it is far better than the “between 0.5 and 3 percent” reported by Tyler in 2001 and the 12% reported by the GED Testing Service in 2014. How were these graphic

design students able to persist in gaining postsecondary degree attainment when such a large percentage of GED recipients do not finish even one year of college?

My experience with GED earners is quite different from the dominant assumptions and narratives. Long and Mullin (2014) state, “The majority of college personnel tend to stereotype GED certificate holders as being academically underprepared for the rigors of postsecondary education” (p. xviii). My research does not paint such a bleak picture of the GED earner; my research presents portraits of GED earners who have been successful in the attainment of an associate degree. A qualitative study that captures the experiences and insights of GED recipients from their perspective will enable both educators and the community college to better serve GED earners.

The GED Testing Service also indicates the need for a study of GED students and persistence. Zhang, Guison-Dowdy, Patterson, and Song (2011) state, “Future studies need to examine details of GED test passers’ postsecondary education experiences, including their financial status, credits taken each year, their academic performance, and relationships with peers and instructors” (p. xi). In looking at persistence as it relates to graduation, this same report, citing the problems of a first to second year low retention rate, continued, “it was unclear whether type of course taken, counseling services, support services, or non-academic factors played a role in low retention” (p. xi). My study focused on the educational experiences of graphic design students concerning degree completion from the GED earner’s perspective. I hope what I learned from their experiences will be informative to both educators and those who make administrative decisions that affect GED graduates enrolled in the community college system.

Published Research on the GED

Whether or not the GED credential is actually equivalent to a high school diploma is heavily debated. The majority of published research concerning the GED attempts to answer several facets of this one question: How do GED holders compare to individuals who graduate from high school with a regular diploma? The bulk of research attempting to answer this question has focused on the economic aspects for labor and industry.

Tyler (2003) opines that the reason a greater number of research studies focus on the economic benefits of the GED credential is because of the dollar amount of funding that supports adult education. Federal funds used for adult education programs in fiscal year 2015 totaled \$568 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Therefore, the majority of research studies performed are interested in determining the value of the GED and whether or not the GED and the traditional diploma are equivalent when addressing wages, earnings, hours of work, unemployment experience, or job tenure.

Researchers for the U.S. Department of Education, Boesel, Alsalam, and Smith (1998) attempted to answer the question of how GED earners compare to high school graduates in their research synthesis on issues surrounding the GED. Ultimately they found GED candidates earned less than high school graduates, even though their wages were 5–11% higher than those of high school dropouts. Cameron and Heckman (1993) reported that GED credential holders were similar to high school dropouts in relation to economic gains. They determined that the only advantage derived from the GED credential was when the credential is used as a gateway to higher education. Smith (2003) states, “the GED, as a terminal degree, may have little short-run economic value, but it

can provide a bridge for dropouts to reconnect to both the education system and their high school graduate peers” (p. 395). Zhang et al. (2011) reported that in 2009, 65.1% of test passers indicated further education as a reason for testing (p. vii).

Research studies have also looked at the patterns of GED earners as they matriculate into postsecondary institutions. This research shows that when GED earners enroll in postsecondary education they are more likely to enroll in technical schools and community colleges than four-year institutions (Boesel et al., 1998). In addition, to address President Barack Obama’s call to increase the number of adults with college degrees by the year 2020, many initiatives have been launched over the last several years to encourage community colleges and professional organizations to assist adults in their transition to higher education. These initiatives are indeed increasing the enrollment of GED earners who enter postsecondary education. In fact, nearly half of all GED holders eventually enroll in postsecondary education (Garvey & Grobe, 2011). However, Murnane, Willett, and Tyler (2000) found that traditional high school graduates completed almost two and a half more years of postsecondary education than GED earners.

Knowing this information points to a critical need for research that focuses on GED earners once they have enrolled in postsecondary institutions. Yet, there is a paucity of published research that addresses this topic. The first study to address the persistence and attrition rates of GED earners was the national Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) Longitudinal Study: 1996-2001 (BPS:1996/2001). Prior to this study, GED earners were not differentiated from traditional high school graduates. The BPS:1996/2001 was a

six-year longitudinal study that followed traditional high school graduates and GED earners as they began their postsecondary educational studies beginning in the 1995-96 academic year. The study included approximately 12,000 demographically representative postsecondary students, but only focused on a sample of 110 GED earners. The outcomes of the study showed that when looking at the first semester of enrollment, GED students tended to drop out at a faster rate compared to their high school counterparts. However, after GED earners completed two semesters, the dropout percentages were comparable (Long & Mullin, 2014).

No research had been published that looked solely at the persistence of GED earners in postsecondary education until 2010 when *Crossing the Bridge*, a six-year longitudinal study, was published. One reason for this void in the literature was because prior to the 2002 Series GED test, “it was impossible to follow the postsecondary educational paths of GED credential recipients at a national level because individual-level data were not collected nationally” (Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guision-Dowdy, 2010, p. ix). The *Crossing the Bridge* study was funded by the American Council on Education (ACE) and conducted by Patterson, Zhang, Song, and Guision-Dowdy, staff at the GED Testing Service. The study looked at a 2003 cohort of over 148,000 GED earners and compared their college trajectories to traditional high school graduates. This study tracked those individuals through the 2009-2010 academic year. The second year of the study looked at a random sample of a 2004 cohort of GED earners. The purpose of this report was to “describe which adults with GED credentials pursued postsecondary education, when and where they enrolled, and how they persisted, in context of results for

individuals, within institutional settings, and by educational background” (Zhang et al., 2011, p. 2). Due to a cut in funding, the third year of the report was never published. However, using the data from this study, ACE published two follow-up reports, *Journeys through College* and *Journey through College 2* (Guison-Dowdy & Patterson, 2011a, 2011b).

What I have garnered from the *Crossing the Bridge* research concerning background characteristics of GED earners is the following. The median age of postsecondary enrollees in both cohorts was 20, half of the enrollees in postsecondary education were female, three out of five were White, one out of six was African American and one out of six was Hispanic. In addition, it takes longer for GED earners to enroll in postsecondary institutions. Also, GED earners are older entering postsecondary institutions at approximately 24 years of age compared to 18, and they may take twice as long to complete postsecondary education when compared with traditional high school graduates. For these two cohorts, the graduation rate was 12% (Zhang et al., 2011).

From this research, what I found most interesting is not in how they differ, but ways in which the GED earner and the traditional high school graduate are the same. Twenty-one percent of first-year college students took remedial coursework regardless of whether they were GED earners or traditional high school graduates. Looking specifically at remedial math and writing courses, 18% of GED earners needed developmental math courses compared to 17% for high school graduates, and 8% of both groups needed remedial writing courses. In addition, unexpectedly, 56% of traditional high school graduates had a GPA of 3.0 or higher in the first year compared to 65% for GED passers.

Six years later both groups had a GPA of at least 3.25 (Guison-Dowdy & Patterson, 2011b).

In these studies, GED earners and traditional high school graduates seem to be quite similar when looking at preparation for college level coursework. The most noteworthy difference between the two groups is that GED earners have a higher percentage of learning disabilities when compared with high school graduates, 17% and 10%, respectively. The *Crossing the Bridge* study primarily creates an enrollment picture of GED earners entering postsecondary institutions, their enrollment timing, their background characteristics, and their low persistence rates.

The most extreme void in published research is the lack of qualitative research that addresses the retention of GED earners in higher education. This could be due to federal grant-funding agencies under George W. Bush, which only supported research with randomized controlled trials. Anyon (2009) writes, “qualitative studies received little attention, and the use of systematic theory to guide research was not valued” (p. 1). She notes the problem with quantitative research is that it yields data, but very little social explanation. Since I learned from Tyler (2005) that only 10% of students with a GED credential complete at least one year of college, and only 3% acquire at least an associate degree, a big question for me continues to be, “Why do so few GED earners persist to the point of graduation?” None of the quantitative studies performed to date even begin to answer this very important question.

To date there has been only one published qualitative study that looks at GED earners in postsecondary institutions that addresses the experiences of GED students in

postsecondary education as told from the perspective of the GED student. The one published qualitative study—*Perceptions and Pathways* was a follow up study to *Crossing the Bridge*. In this study, Quigley, Patterson, and Zhang (2011) asked, “What experiences, motivations, and developed perceptions have influenced members of the [2005–06 GED test credential recipient] population to either choose or not choose to pursue a postsecondary education” (p. 2)? In addition, the same line of questioning was asked of GED earners that entered but decided not to complete postsecondary education. The *Perceptions and Pathways* study is the first study that truly focused on attempting to understand why the graduation rate of GED earners is so low. This study focused on the educational journey of the GED earner, beginning with their decision to drop out of secondary school, taking the GED test, going or not going on to postsecondary education, and completing or not completing postsecondary education (Quigley et al., 2011). Eighty-five, one-on-one, 60-90 minute interviews were conducted in eight states—California, Connecticut, Kansas, North Carolina, Texas, West Virginia, Washington, DC, and Wyoming. However, before the *Perceptions and Pathways* research project was finalized, and also before the year three report of *Crossing the Bridge* was produced, the research department at ACE was closed (Patterson, 2014). All that was produced from the *Perceptions and Pathways* study was a preliminary report.

The preliminary report produced a good number of themes, but the data was not analyzed. The primary focus of the report has been to share the insights and recommendations of the participants with schools, adult educators, GED administrators, community college administrators and staff because of the promise the researchers made

to the participants to share this information (Patterson, 2014). However, the recommendations primarily address recruitment, the need for access to counselors and support staff, assistance concerning financial aid, dropping out signals, and the need for flexible class times. No additional analysis has been performed on the data, and no follow up research has been pursued.

The majority of these studies on GED credentialed students focused on the GED earners access to postsecondary education, their background characteristics including both demographic and academic data, the amount of time it takes the GED earner to enroll in and complete postsecondary education, as well as the differences and similarities between traditional high school graduates and GED earners. From all of these studies we have primarily learned the background characteristics of GED earners, and their enrollment, persistence, and completion patterns. We have even listened to the voices of GED earners as they make recommendations to college staff. However, we know practically nothing about the actual experiences of GED earners in the postsecondary classroom, and how these experiences and perceptions affect persistence. This study extends this line of research.

Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this study is to better understand under what conditions degree attainment takes place for GED recipients. In this study, I focused on which experiences lead to associate degree attainment by GED earners enrolled in the community college from their own perspectives. This study focused on graphic design students. I concentrated on graphic design students specifically for several reasons. First, this is my

area of concentration. I have been teaching graphic design students for almost twenty years and I wanted to learn more about persistence from my students. Second, because I taught these participants, I formed bonds with them, which I believe creates an environment of trust and allowed them to feel comfortable openly and honestly sharing their experiences with me. Being deeply involved with these students for a minimum of two years, allowed me to “develop the thick description used for interpreting how people within a cultural group construct, share, and negotiate meaning” (Glesne, 2015, p. 21). And finally, much of the most recent research suggests the importance of performing program specific studies. Tinto (1993) writes “Only institution specific studies. . . can provide insight into circumstances” (p. 22).

Doing a qualitative study allowed me to perform in-depth interviews with GED earners with the intent of learning from their educational experiences why these individuals believed they persisted to the point of associate degree attainment. Therefore, the overarching research question that guided this study was, “What conditions and experiences lead to associate degree attainment for GED earners enrolled in a graphic design program in one particular community college?”

Summary

While the persistence of college students is a highly researched area, the persistence of GED earners as they matriculate into postsecondary education is sparsely researched. The bulk of research concerning the GED focuses primarily on whether or not the GED credential is equivalent to a high school diploma and whether or not the earnings of a GED earner are comparable to a high school graduate in the labor market.

The very limited amount of research that has been performed on GED earners in postsecondary institutions is quantitative in nature and paints a very bleak picture of the GED earners' success in college. To date there has been only one published qualitative study that looks solely at GED earners in postsecondary institutions and the funding for this study was cut prior to the final analysis of the data. The intent of my study is to provide community college educators and administrators with a lens that is contradictory to the dominant narratives and assumptions concerning GED earners. My hope is that the substantive theory generated by my research will assist community college educators and administrators in better understanding and supporting GED earners through their educational endeavors.

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter I is an introduction to the study and includes the need for the study, published research on the GED, the purpose for the research, and the overarching research question. Chapter II addresses why I chose to avoid applying a theoretical framework at the beginning of my research, and also how social justice and critical pedagogy color the lens in which I view the research. This chapter includes my rationale for using the grounded theory methodology to generate a theory instead of framing my study with an existing one. Chapter II also includes the literature review, which covers the history and purpose of the community college, the history of the GED, and an investigation of the most dominant persistence theories. In Chapter III, I provide an overview of both grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory methodologies. I also introduce my research participants, and explain the protocol

for my data collection and analysis, as well as the ways in which I addressed trustworthiness in my study. Chapter III ends with an explanation of subjectivity and the purpose of reflexivity in qualitative research, and closes with an explanation of my background and how my commitment to social justice shapes my positionality as a constructivist researcher and educator. Chapter IV provides an in-depth back story of each participant's educational experience starting with why they made the decision to find an alternative path to earning the high school credential needed for postsecondary education, as well as how they ultimately came to enroll in the Advertising & Graphic Design program at the college. Chapter V includes a detailed description of the grounded theory coding process I used to analyze the data, data from the interviews with the GED participants and how it impacted the theory which emerged, a discussion of the central phenomenon that evolved from the data, and the substantive theory I propose concerning the persistence of GED earners. Chapter VI ends with the conclusions of the study, the implications of the study's findings and my closing thoughts.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Methodological Versus Substantive Theories

Theory used as a theoretical framework that relates to research paradigms and methodologies differs from *theory* used as a theoretical lens to assist in the understanding of a phenomena. Hatch (2002) differentiates these two types of theory as “methodological and substantive” theories (p. 38). Methodological theory places the study within a research paradigm and establishes a foundation for the design of the study. Substantive theory is used to situate the dissertation in relationship to theory or theories that have already been generated in a field of study, and also allows for a description and explanation of the phenomena being studied (Hatch, 2002).

Methodological Theoretical Framework of a Constructivist Researcher

My methodological theoretical framework is in alignment with the constructivist paradigm. Unlike positivists who believe the truth is out there waiting to be discovered, constructivists believe human beings do not find or discover knowledge, but make or construct it. “The constructivist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent co-create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 24). Constructivists believe the world and

reality are socially constructed and approach research with the intention of understanding human experiences. Constructivists claim that human experience can be understood through the dialogue between researchers and participants, and that meaning is constructed through negotiations. This process allows for a more informed understanding of society.

Cognitive human beings, unlike matter, give meaning to their environment and themselves, and their environment is shaped by the cultures in which they live. Punch (2009) writes, “constructivism maintains that realities are local, specific and constructed; they are socially and experientially based, and depend on the individual or groups holding them” (p. 18, citing Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In addition, these cultural environments affect the actions and institutions in which individuals participate. Constructivists argue that we cannot understand an individual’s perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, etc. without understanding how (s)he attempts to make sense of her/his world.

Constructivists are more inclined towards qualitative studies, or might choose to use a combination of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, referred to as a mixed methods study. Constructivists rely heavily on naturalistic qualitative methodologies where “researchers spend extended periods of time interviewing participants and observing them in their natural settings in an effort to reconstruct the constructions participants use to make sense of their worlds” (Hatch, 2002, p. 15). The types of studies or the research design of constructivists are classified as “narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, or case studies” (Creswell, 2014, p. 12).

Methodological Theoretical Framework of a Social Justice Researcher

Being an advocate for social justice applies another methodological theoretical framework that affects the way I approached the research for this dissertation. “The concept of social justice in education indicates that schools and society are, and always have been, replete with injustice” (Boyles, Carusi, & Attick, 2009, p. 30). Therefore, the goal of social justice work is to create societal change by interrogating the social injustices found both in schools and in the wider community.

Two opposing methodological theoretical frameworks with a focus on social justice are damage-centered research and desire-based research. Damage centered research, although typically performed by researchers with good intentions, is problematic. The problem is that this type of research, which is often used to gain funding or other benefits for marginalized groups, in turn requires marginalized populations to accept themselves as broken. “Much of social science and educational research seeks to document pain, loss, brokenness, or damage in order to establish the grounds to informally or formally petition for reparations comprised of political, material, or sovereign gains” (Tuck, 2009, as cited in Tuck, 2012, p. 19).

Comparing the two theoretical frameworks (damage-centered versus desire-based) as they relate to Tuck’s work concerning the GED, she saw youth’s desire to get away from a negative high school experience, and making the best choices in difficult situations, as well as wishing deeply for a better future as desire-based. She contrasts this with damage-centered thinking, which would include other’s negative ideas about these youth, that they made bad choices about earning a GED, or that they are lazy, or that they

don't care (Tuck, 2012). As I conducted my research with the intent of uncovering the participant's experiences from high school, to GED, to associate degree, I applied the theoretical lens of desired-based thinking throughout all aspects of the research process.

Methodological Theoretical Framework of a Critical Researcher and Scholar

Being a community college educator, critical researcher, and student in the program of Educational Studies with a Concentration in Cultural Studies at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro also affected this research. There are numerous educators and critical pedagogy scholars that inform my thinking concerning critical pedagogy and emancipatory education with the works of Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Nel Noddings being three of the most influential.

As a critical scholar, I believe education is positioned by special interest groups to function in the name of democracy and justice, yet in reality, for many it is totalitarian and oppressive. There are hegemonic power structures in place that judge individuals based on their race, class, gender, culture, sexual orientation, religion, etc., that restrict their ability to make changes, and deny their right to agency and empowerment (Freire, 1997, 1998; hooks, 2010). To combat these injustices, a collective responsibility is needed to make our classrooms more socially just and participatory, which allows education to ultimately become more emancipatory.

Mainstream versions of knowledge are publicized by individuals who believe education should consist of technical training for the workforce and depositing content into the minds of students (Freire, 1997). This emotionless transfer of information was coined by Freire as the "banking method" of education. In contrast, he believed

educational practice must go beyond “reading of the word” to the “reading of the world,” and beyond “reading of the text” to “reading of the context” (Freire, 1997, p. 46). He believed without these processes, curiosity of learning is lost. Freire assisted in the education of his students by teaching them to read critically, which allowed them to become more conscious of their position in life. He advocated for the critically conscious thinker, who is always trying to change the world for the better, but he also emphasized hope. Freire (1997) states,

Hope is an ontological requirement for human beings Hope of liberation does not mean liberation already. It is necessary to fight for it, within historically favorable conditions. If they do not exist, we must hopefully labor to create them. Liberation is a possibility, not fate nor destiny nor burden. In this context, one can realize the importance of education for decision, for rupture, for choice, for ethics at last. (p. 44)

Caring is another important aspect of a socially just education. According to Noddings (1984), caring is a moral task to create, maintain and enhance caring relationships. However, she notes that caring is a learned process, and that there is an extremely different perception of caring posited by policymakers and educators who believe “caring is a pedagogical virtue demonstrated by forcing students to achieve the skills and acquire the knowledge . . . that they [the educators] believe is good for them” (Noddings, 2005, p. xiv). Noddings (1992) posits that curricula should be organized around themes of care, “caring for self, for intimate others, for strangers and global others, for the natural world and its nonhuman creatures, for the human made world, and for ideas” (p. 148), rather than around traditional disciplines, and that people should expect more from their education than academic achievement.

hooks (1994) believes optimal learning takes place when an ethic of love forms the basis of student-teacher interaction. She defines a love ethic as “a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust” (p. 94). Emancipatory learning requires listening in love, believing that the other person has something important to share.

Additionally, because I am concerned with how institutional values, ideology and power affect others, I am critically conscious of the dominant assumptions concerning persistence embedded in many existing theoretical frameworks. For example, while Vincent Tinto’s theory of retention is one of the most dominant persistence theories, his theory is problematic in that he only analyzed white, middle-class students who lived on campus at four-year institutions. His original theories, both 1975 and 1987, did not consider two-year colleges, non-traditional students, minority students, or those who commute to college (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004).

Tierney, 1992; Rendon, Jalomo & Nora, 2000; Kuh & Love, 2000 critically question the validity of Tinto’s work believing that all of his models are based on an assimilation/acculturation framework. “Assimilation required a process of separation, a cultural adaptation that required minority individuals to break away from their traditions, customs, values, languages, etc., in order to find full membership in the predominantly white American society (Rendon, Jalomo & Nora, 2000, p. 128). The authors of these critiques used a cultural lens to examine the many assumptions in Tinto’s student departure theories. I elaborate more on both Tinto’s and other existing persistence studies and how they can also be problematized in the literature review and in the data analysis.

Substantive Theoretical Frameworks

There are numerous theoretical lenses or “substantive” theories available to researchers, and they originate in many different disciplines, including but not limited to economics, political science, sociology, anthropology and psychology (Anfara & Mertz, 2006). For example, William Spady applied Emile Durkheim’s theory of suicide to educational persistence studies. Spady built a descriptive theory that specifies the conditions under which dropout occurs and viewed dropping out of college as analogous to that of suicide in the wider society (Tinto, 1975). Tinto also applied Van Gennep’s rites of passage theory to assist in the understanding of college student persistence (Tinto, 1993). Using both Durkheim’s theory of suicide and Van Gennep’s rites of passage theory in educational persistence studies provided a unique view of the phenomena being studied.

While substantive theory is used to interpret a phenomenon, it is also critically important to be conscious of the fact that, “any framework or theory allows the researcher to ‘see’ and understand certain aspects of the phenomenon being studied while concealing other aspects” (Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. xxviii). This fact is one of the reasons why the grounded theory methodology appeals to me as a researcher. Applying a theoretical framework at the beginning of my study, would have required me to state the theoretical lens I intended to use prior to performing the study and I did not feel comfortable chaining myself to any one particular theory. Therefore, I decided to develop a theory through the use of grounded theory versus applying a theoretical framework at the start.

Constructivist Grounded Theory Researcher

In this dissertation, I researched the phenomenon, persistence, specifically from the perspectives of GED earners enrolled in postsecondary education at the community college level. Therefore, based on my research interests, as well as my worldview, the most appropriate way to design this study was to employ a qualitative grounded theory study using the methodological lens of the constructivist paradigm.

Grounded theory is not a theory in and of itself, but a methodology for developing theory that is based or “grounded” in the data. Grounded theory requires searching through data to find theories that emerge from the data in an inductive method of research, keeping all theoretical possibilities open. Grounded theory is different from other theoretical methodologies in that its purpose is not to apply a theory, in contrast to other methods where a deductive method is used to look at other theories and literature, and then attempt to use data to verify the theory or to disprove the theory. Grounded theory starts with the data, and then uses the data to develop a theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

My methodological theoretical framework is in alignment with the constructivist paradigm and therefore creates the foundation for the design of my study. However, as noted, I did not solidify any one particular substantive theory to frame my study. I believed it was important to first analyze the data. My interest is in the persistence of GED earners in a graphic design program in postsecondary education, from the perspective of the students. Therefore, in the next section, to gain a better understanding of the existing theories concerning postsecondary persistence, I will map the literature on

persistence theories that have been used to study students in higher education. Since my interest is in the degree attainment of GED earners in the community college, I will also present an overview of the history and purpose of the community college, and also summarize the history of the GED.

Literature Review

History, Mission, and Purpose of the Community College

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2016) reports that community colleges have been in existence since the beginning of the 20th century. Joliet Junior College in Illinois is the oldest existing public two-year institution and was founded in 1901. Initially community colleges provided general liberal arts studies. However, during the Great Depression, in order to assist in decreasing widespread unemployment, community colleges started offering job-training programs. After WW II, the U.S. industry needed a more skilled workforce. This economic drive along with the GI Bill created a need for additional higher education options. By the 1960s there were 457 public community colleges. Today, when including branch campuses, there are over 1600 community colleges enrolling nearly eight million students (AACC, 2016).

The broad mission of the community college is to provide access to higher education and services that strengthen the community (Vaughan, 2006). More specifically, community colleges are committed to the following:

serving all segments of society through an open-access admissions policy that offers equal and fair treatment to all students, providing a comprehensive educational program, serving the community as a community-based institution of higher education, teaching and learning, and fostering lifelong learning. (Vaughan, 2006, p. 3)

As both a faculty member and department chair in the community college since 2001, numerous times throughout my tenure, I have heard the following analogy of a key concerning open access and equity.

One way to illustrate the community college's commitment to access is to imagine each student having a key that represents educational achievement. A student who approaches a community college will find the main door open and therefore will not need the key to enter. A student who ultimately wishes to earn a bachelor's degree, however, will look for the door labeled College Transfer, which does require a key in the form of prerequisites such as college preparatory mathematics. If the student's key will not open the College Transfer door, there are alternatives, such as short-term training leading to immediate employment, for which the student's key may be compatible. Or the student can find the door labeled Developmental and Pre-College Courses. Like the door to the college, this one is open and does not require a key. Consequently, after completing developmental courses, the student may find it possible to open the door to College Transfer and continue on the path to a degree. Access does not mean that anyone can enter any program without the necessary prerequisites but that options are available. Furthermore, community colleges must offer comprehensive programs with alternatives in order to fulfill the promises of access and equity. (Vaughan, 2006, p. 5)

While this story paints an ideal picture of the mission of the community college, there are varying schools of thought concerning the purpose of community colleges.

Dowd (2007) notes that while one ideology appeals to the principles of a democratic education, meritocracy, equal opportunity, and social mobility by providing open access to marginalized groups who have historically been excluded from higher education, another comes from a socioeconomic mindset that looks at the community college from a fiscal perspective and sees the community college as a lower cost higher education option for Pell grant applicants who are oftentimes less academically prepared, and who are frequently seen as opportunities to provide labor for the workforce.

Nasaw (1979) reports that the educational needs of students have never been a top priority. He posits that the planners for these institutions have historically had multiple agendas and purposes. He states that educational decisions starting as early as the common schools in 1835 have been “dedicated not to meeting the self-perceived needs of their students but to preserving social peace and prosperity within the context of private property and the governmental structures that safeguard it” (p. 242).

Institutions of higher learning were initially reserved for those who could afford them. The first instance of acceptance of non-traditional students without the means to pay tuition was through the federal funding of the GI Bill. However, this bill was primarily directed towards addressing the problems that massive unemployment of returning veterans would create on the U.S. economy and only secondarily towards the needs of the actual veterans (Nasaw, 1979). He states, “Unemployment was rising and would continue to rise as farm employment decreased, automation increased, and millions of women entered the labor force” (Nasaw, 1979, p. 203). While enrolling veterans into institutions of higher learning successfully delayed a portion of the population looking for work, there were still a limited number of jobs that offered upward social mobility and even more individuals who wanted those types of jobs. For individuals wanting entrance into the middle class, factory and blue-collar jobs were not the way to go because those were viewed as dead end jobs. During this time, it was believed that a college degree was necessary for jobs that offered the greatest opportunities for advancement (Nasaw, 1979).

In addition to a larger percentage of the population desiring higher education, higher education planners at all levels wanted to increase access to higher education; not necessarily because that was what the people wanted, but more so because they felt that was what the economy needed. Planners believed that keeping kids in school through their early twenties wasn't going to solve the unemployment problem, but it would definitely make it more manageable. The educational planners wanted these young people admitted to institutions of higher learning, and admitted quickly so they could be trained for technical jobs in both the public and private sectors. Higher education had been given a new goal and was now tasked with the responsibility of training students for semiprofessional, lower-level white-collar positions. However, it was never the intent of higher educational institutions to admit these new students to the same universities and private colleges where future leaders were being educated. While the President's Commission argued that "up to 49 percent of college-age youth should be in some postsecondary institution, they were not recommending that all of them attend four-year colleges" (Nasaw, 1979, p. 205). Therefore, consequently the community college was born, and while these colleges were presented as transfer institutions to the four year schools, they were actually designed to keep these new students away from them (Nasaw, 1979).

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) note that for the last forty years, supporters and critics of the community college have heavily debated whether community colleges "democratize or divert educational attainment opportunities" (p. 375). Supporters believe that without the community college as a higher education option low-income and racial-

ethnic minority groups would not be afforded access to postsecondary education. On the other hand, critics claim community colleges divert opportunity by detouring entrance into the four-year institutions. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) note that some critics believe that “the community colleges preserve social stratification by reducing the opportunities for lower socioeconomic class students to enter bachelor’s degree programs.

I would argue that the community college has very little control in the students it receives because decisions as to whether or not a student can enter a public four-year institution are set by those institutions and are reinforced by the public high schools. For example, in North Carolina high school students are told that the minimum admission requirements for the 16 constituent institutions of the University of North Carolina require graduation from high school, a satisfactory score on the SAT or ACT and an overall 2.5 grade point average. In addition, the following courses are mandatory: English I, II, III, and IV and two units in a foreign language, Math I, II, III, and one additional math based on the student’s post high school plans, three course units of Social Studies including U.S. History, Civics & Economics, and World History, and one course unit in Health and Physical Education (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2014). In addition, there is an articulation agreement between the 16 constituent institutions of the University of North Carolina and the 58 NC Community Colleges and this agreement only allows for very specific courses to transfer from the community colleges to these four-year institutions. Again these mandates are set by the

University system and must be met before admission to the university is granted to the community college student.

In closing, I believe the majority of individuals who work in the community college system would agree that the key is an appropriate analogy for the mission of the community college. The analogy of the key definitely suggests that every person can enter the community college system and be educated, but that the doors to certain community college programs are only open to those who have the appropriate preparation. However, all students can use remedial courses and other means to achieve their goals. Dowd (2007) and Nasaw (1979) reveal other economic and governmental goals which are being served. Nasaw's research on the history of education stems from having access to the primary documents that are public record. He notes, "The master plans that established the public education system of the 1960s were debated and passed by state legislatures; they are now part of the public record. So too is the logic behind them" (Nasaw, 1979, p. 210). I also assume that the majority of individuals working within the community college system have not been exposed to this in depth history of the community college, and most have not been exposed to the varying perspectives concerning the mission of the community college either.

While the mission statement of the community college system implies that the community college is to be responsive to the community's needs, the statement doesn't even mention the GED or other non-credit courses (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014). "While missions vary across localities and states, providing basic and secondary education, as well as GED preparation, is often overlooked as a way

community colleges expand access to education” (Ryder & Hagedorn, 2012, p. 22).

Ryder and Hagedorn (2012) note, “as ubiquitous as noncredit may be, noncredit students remain the neglected sector of the community college mission” (p. 21).

There is a huge lack of research that focuses on the GED and other non-credit courses. In 1991, the U.S. had a national research and development center focused on programs to assist adult learners, whether through the acquisition of a GED or other high school certification, to transition to postsecondary education or training. From 1991 to 1997 that research center was the National Center for Adult Literacy (NCAL). In 1997 its name was changed to the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). The U.S. Department of Education ended NCSALL’s funding on March 31, 2007 (Comings, 2007). There seems to be no documentation that states why the U.S. Department of Education stopped funding the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. The NCSALL website simply states that

The research dissemination efforts of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) ended on March 31, 2007, with the end of the federal funding. . . . World Education continues to host this site so that the valuable resources developed during this time are still accessible. (NCSALL, 2007)

Another arm of the U.S. Department of Education, The Institute of Education Sciences (IES), addresses statistics, research, and evaluation. The IES covers education and readiness for a broad spectrum of the educational population, from infants to adults. Special populations such as English learners and students with disabilities are also covered in its research (IES, n.d.a). The stated mission of the IES Research and

Development Center (NCER) is “to contribute to the production and dissemination of rigorous evidence and products that provide practical solutions to important education problems in the United States” (NCER, n.d., para. 1). Yet only one out of the ten centers, the “Center for the Study of Adult Literacy (CSAL): Developing Instructional Approaches Suited to the Cognitive and Motivational Needs for Struggling Adults” focuses on adult learners. However, the current funding under this center focuses on “ways to advance the reading skills of struggling adult learners reading at the 3rd to 8th grade levels” (Institute of Education Sciences, n.d.b., “Purpose”). A lack of research concerning adult learners, particularly adult learners, in the community college system, leaves a void that needs to be addressed by future funding and research.

Ryder and Hagedorn (2012) look closely at adult learners from a quantitative research perspective and shed some light on why the GED and other noncredit courses are oftentimes left out of the conversation, even though they account for roughly 40% of the community college population. Ryder and Hagedorn (2012) report that The National Profile of Community Colleges does not include non-credit enrollments because “. . . no accurate national data exist about non-credit activity at community colleges” (p. 21). The only non-credit programs that provide any data are GED programs. However, depending on the state, data could be “confounded by for-profit GED preparation providers” (p. 25). This lack of numerical data coupled with the fact that federal grant-funding agencies under George W. Bush only supported quantitative research could be another reason for the void. Using qualitative research approaches would circumvent the issue of not having numerical data, and also give a better social explanation. To address these issues, this

dissertation employs a qualitative research methodology that asks GED earners who have successfully completed their associate degree about their educational experiences.

History of the GED

Passing a series of five proficiency tests covering English grammar, literature, social studies, natural science and mathematics gives those who did not complete high school the opportunity to earn their high school equivalency credential. The test is graded on an equivalency scale compared to current high school students. To pass, test takers must score on a level comparable to or exceeding 60% of high school seniors (GED Testing Service, 2014). Adult education centers offer test-prep courses, and students may also purchase study books or find free practice exams and questions online. GED tests may be taken with a number of different testing service providers.

Over the past sixty years there have been five generations of GED tests, the 1942, 1978, 1988, 2002, and 2014 series. The GED Testing Service website states, “While the academic content areas in which candidates are assessed—English language arts (reading/writing), social studies, science, and mathematics—have not changed, the priorities and assumptions by which proficiency in these areas is assessed have evolved” (GED Testing Service, 2014). The changes in the tests have occurred for a number of varied reasons.

The very first GED tests were given in 1943 to veterans returning from World War II. The U.S. government commissioned the American Council on Education (ACE), to create tests that covered English grammar, literature, social studies, natural science and mathematics. These tests were administered to veterans so they could gain a high school

equivalency credential. Passing the test showed that while serving our country in war, a particular soldier had achieved skills equivalent to high school students. The first 1942 series test was developed during an industrial era when high school completion was all that was needed for employment in most areas (GED Testing Service, 2014).

New York State in 1947 was the first state to allow persons to take the GED who were not veterans. The number of people taking the GED grew slowly until the mid-1960s. Over the next 20 years, the number of GED test takers increased exponentially, from approximately 61,000 in 1960 to over 816,000 in 1980 (Malizio, 1986). In 1977, the last year of the 1942 series test, more than 40% of the test takers indicated employment reasons for taking the test and 37% reported plans for further education. The second generation of GED tests administered after 1978 were designed by high school curriculum specialists, and as such, were more concerned with the subject matter of the test. In 1978 there was little concern for social mobility in the creation of the test. The emphasis was solely on making a test that was comparable to a high school education (Tyler, 2005).

The 1988 series test was the result of a five-year study incorporating the ideas of many educational professionals. The drive for the redesign of the test focused on “a heightened awareness worldwide of the shift from an industrial age to an information society—one characterized by a commonplace use of technology, global awareness, and participatory democracy” (GED Testing Service, 2014). There was also a change in the reasons candidates were taking the tests. While 30% reported taking the test for

employment reasons, now more than 65% of candidates noted they were taking the test for entry into postsecondary education (GED Testing Service, 2014).

The creators of the next to the last generation of tests, created in 2002, claimed that the test would assist individuals in achieving economic mobility. The 2002 test was created after the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 and the GED was positioned to be the standard for the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. However, “the [2002] revision was largely informed by corporate representatives in order to reconnect the qualifications of GED earners with the needs of corporate representatives . . . [such as] Taco Bell, Safeway, Motorola, and the National Alliance of Businesses” (Tuck, 2012, p. 96).

With each new series of the test, societal argument has ensued as to whether or not the new tests are equitable, but nothing has been so heavily debated as the latest series of the GED tests—the 2014 series. In 2011, the non-profit organization ACE, which up until this point had been solely responsible for the creation of and changes to the GED tests, joined with PearsonVUE, a for-profit venture, to create the *new* GED Testing Service. Gewertz (2011) noted that according to the Chronicle of Education, this collaboration brought ACE over \$17 million in gross revenue. PearsonVUE is responsible for the fifth generation of tests, the 2014 series. The 2014 series test is aligned with Common Core standards. The American Education Research Association states the new GED “includes greater expectations for test-takers’ reading abilities, a focus on higher order thinking skills, and an emphasis on more authentic texts and tasks” (Hoffman, Wine, & McKinney, 2013, p. 2). Of particular note is that the math portion of

the test is much more difficult than in previous versions, making the credential harder to obtain for those with weak math skills. Also, the new test is only administered on the computer. The test caused additional political uproar because of its costs to the states and to the individuals, and there was also a concern as to what entity has the right to testing results for statistical purposes (Clymer, 2012).

There was a great deal of controversy surrounding the 2014 GED test. Concerns about the test came from many perspectives, including but not limited to state legislators, community colleges, and centers advocating for economic, social, and political justice. Some of the 2012–2013 national headlines read, “Why a Privatized GED Will Fail Students” (Vyse, 2012), “Testy Battle Over Tests” (Fain, 2013), and “Some States Dropping GED as Test Price Spikes” (Hollingsworth, 2013). There was so much controversy surrounding the new tests that competitors McGraw-Hill (TASC) and ETS (HiSet) responded with an alternative test. Their tests included a paper version and a cheaper price. Now all three nationally-recognized assessments can be used to obtain a state-issued High School Equivalency credential in North Carolina, and all three assessments are recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Passing any one of the assessments will lead to the same High School Equivalency Diploma issued by the North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges. The GED test is available at any of the 58 community colleges and costs \$80.00. The HiSET test is available at 33 of the 58 community colleges and costs \$50.00, and the TASC test is only available at 19 of the NC community colleges and costs \$52.00 (North Carolina Community Colleges, High School Equivalency, 2016). All three test options are available at the community college

where I teach. However, all of the participants in this study took the GED battery of tests prior to the release of the 2014 series, and before any other alternatives were offered.

Persistence Theories

The number of publications addressing student persistence are plentiful, since matriculation and attrition in postsecondary education have been studied for more than 75 years (Braxton, 2000). Because research studies examining educational persistence are one of the most widely researched areas in higher education, this literature review will cover only the most prominent theorists. The most cited researcher studying departure and persistence in higher education is Vincent Tinto. Tinto first published his theoretical model explaining student dropout in 1975. To date, his theory is perhaps the most empirically tested persistence theory in the study of college student persistence and departure (Braxton et al., 2004; Metz, 2002). However, there are mixed reviews concerning the validity of Tinto's models to predict student departure. Many researchers suggest the need for serious revisions to Tinto's theories. In addition, Tinto (2006) himself listened to the critiques of his work and agrees with the weaknesses and shortcomings of his models, and has published many articles and books about persistence since the creation of his original model in 1975. Differences and similarities between the theories of these various researchers will be discussed.

The foundation for Tinto's 1975 student departure theory was built on the previous research of Spady (1971) and Astin (1975). Spady created the very first theoretical model of student attrition and persistence. He viewed persistence as a longitudinal process heavily influenced by family, academic prowess, and socioeconomic

status. Spady believed social integration was the most important factor in persistence and was the first to apply Emile Durkheim's theory of suicide to persistence studies.

Durkheim believed studying suicide would reveal much about the character and problems of a society. Tinto (1975) paraphrases Spady's work by noting, "When one views the college as a social system with its own value and social structures, one can treat dropout from that social system in a manner analogous to that of suicide in the wider society" (p. 91).

In addition to using Spady's application of Durkheim's theory of suicide, Tinto also applied Van Gennep's rites of passage theory to assist in the understanding of college student persistence. Van Gennep perceived life as being comprised of a series of stages that individuals travel throughout their lifespan from membership in one group or status to another, and he believed that ceremonies and rituals assisted individuals through these life transitions. Tinto believed Van Gennep's rites of passage theory provided a framework for assisting in the understanding of the lengthy process of student persistence in college. Van Gennep's theory focuses on three stages of societal passage from youth to adult status. These rites of passage are referred to as separation, transition, and incorporation. Tinto envisioned Van Gennep's theory as an analogy that could be applied to student departure and persistence as new students separate from communities of the past, transition from those communities to finding one's place within the new community, and then fully integrating into the communities of the college (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto notes, however, that "though the work of Van Gennep has led us this far in the development of a theory of student departure, it does not give us a way of thinking

about the largely informal processes of interaction among individuals on campus which leads to incorporation” (Tinto, 1993, p. 99). To advance his thinking on the third stage, incorporation, Tinto followed the work of Emile Durkheim and William Spady. Tinto’s work differs from Spady’s, however, in that Tinto produced a predictive theory to help explain how individuals adopt various forms of dropout behavior, while Spady built a descriptive theory that specifies the conditions under which dropout occurs (Tinto, 1993).

According to Tinto, there is a ladder of success for student persistence, from the initial level of commitment through academic and social integration to subsequent commitment to the institution to a greater likelihood of persistence. Tinto’s theory has a sociological conceptual orientation, and he views student attrition as a longitudinal process that occurs because of the meanings the individual student ascribes to his or her interactions with the formal and informal dimensions of a given college (Braxton et al., 2004). Tinto placed students’ interaction with college on a continuum. Starting with students’ family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling, he moved next to the commitments they bring, in particular goal commitments and institutional commitments, with an understanding that some students bring more defined goals than others. Moving along the continuum, the student enrolls in college, and Tinto then looks at what happens in the two subsets, the academic system and the social system, first, academic integration, which relates to a student’s grade performance and intellectual development, and second, social integration, which relates to peer group interaction and faculty interaction. Tinto posits that integrative experiences of both academic and social integration heighten the likelihood of persistence. He also believes that if the student

finds that his or her emerging goals after experiencing college life are different from the goals of the institution, he or she will not persist. Student goals and institutional goals must align, and if these are not in sync the student is more likely to transfer or drop out (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's model provides researchers with a conceptual framework on which to test his theories on persistence. See Figure 1.

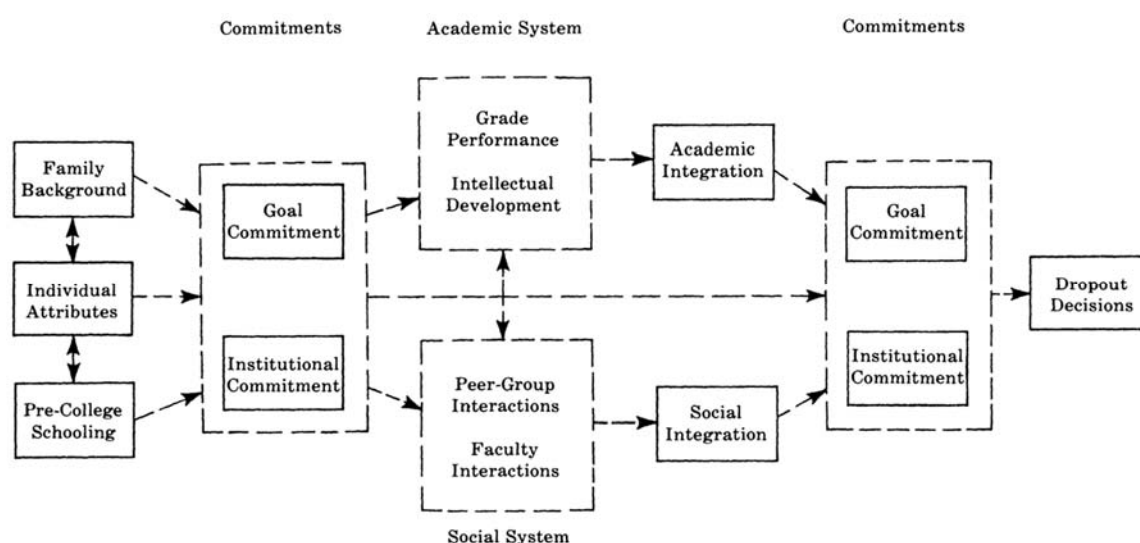


Figure 1. Tinto's Theoretical Model of Dropout (Tinto, 1975, p. 95).

An example of this is found in the work of Bean (1980). Bean's work expanded on the previous work of Tinto (1975) and Astin (1975). Bean's assumption was that student attrition is analogous to turnover in the work organization much like Tinto viewed dropping out of college as analogous to that of suicide in the wider society. Bean created a causal model of attrition integrating background variables and organizational determinants. "Organizational determinants are expected to affect satisfaction, which in turn is expected to influence dropout" (Bean, 1980, p. 157). Bean compared pay in the

workforce with GPA in the institution. If an employee/student feels dissatisfied with their pay/GPA that dissatisfaction creates a negative relationship concerning institutional commitment, which in turn causes dropout. Bean's model placed a great deal of emphasis on organizational behavior (Bean & Metzger, 1985).

Many researchers have used Tinto's model to test his theories on persistence, as well as to expand on his theories. However, there are many criticisms concerning Tinto's theory because he only analyzed white, middle-class students who lived on campus at four-year institutions. His original theory did not consider two-year colleges, non-traditional students, minority students, or those who commute to college (Braxton et al., 2004). There is a minimal amount of research on two-year colleges in general, as well as limited reporting on the effects of attending, persisting, and graduating from two-year colleges.

Pascarella criticized Tinto and other researchers for limiting their research to four-year institutions. He noted this fact in his 1991 synthesis of persistence literature stating that in reviewing over 2,600 studies on the effects of postsecondary education on students, maybe 5% of the studies reviewed focused on community college students (Pascarella, 1999). Metz (2002) notes,

Pascarella suggests it is dangerous to perpetuate the hierarchical nature of postsecondary education and not report community college information as an important and valuable part of post secondary education research. The apparent lack of research and investigations tends to perpetuate stereotypical beliefs and attitudes of this particular segment of the postsecondary realm. (p. 19)

Bean and Metzger (1985) were two of the first researchers to create a causal model of student attrition for the non-traditional college student, which was based on the theoretical models of Spady, Astin, and Tinto. Spady, Astin, and Tinto's models share many of the same elements and rely heavily on background variables, academic variables and social interactions to explain the longitudinal process of student attrition. Bean and Metzger's student attrition model included background characteristics, and academic and environmental variables. They believed the environmental variables external to the institution were key factors concerning non-traditional college students, and that environmental factors were more important than academic factors.

Bean and Metzger posited that a different theory was needed because they didn't feel commuter students had the time to commit to social integration, and they found that non-traditional students were more closely connected to their external environments. Bean created a very complex model, which theorizes that there are varying paths to student dropout, as shown in his diagram. He added psychological outcomes as a possible indicator on the path to dropping out (see Figure 2).

Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, and Hengler (1992) criticized Tinto's Student Integration Model for not including external factors. On the other hand, Bean and Metzger's Student Attrition model did incorporate the environmental variables external to the institution, such as finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunities to transfer. Cabrera et al. tested both of these theories in a four-year institution and found that "almost 70 percent of the Student Integration's Model's hypotheses were confirmed, whereas only 40 percent of the hypotheses

underlying the Student Attrition Model were supported” (Cabrera et al., 1992, p. 158).

However, they found that Bean and Metzger’s Student Attrition Model was better for measuring intent to persist and persistence. Cabrera et al. found that the two theories were complementary, and they recommended that these two major theories be combined to gain a more comprehensive understanding of college persistence.

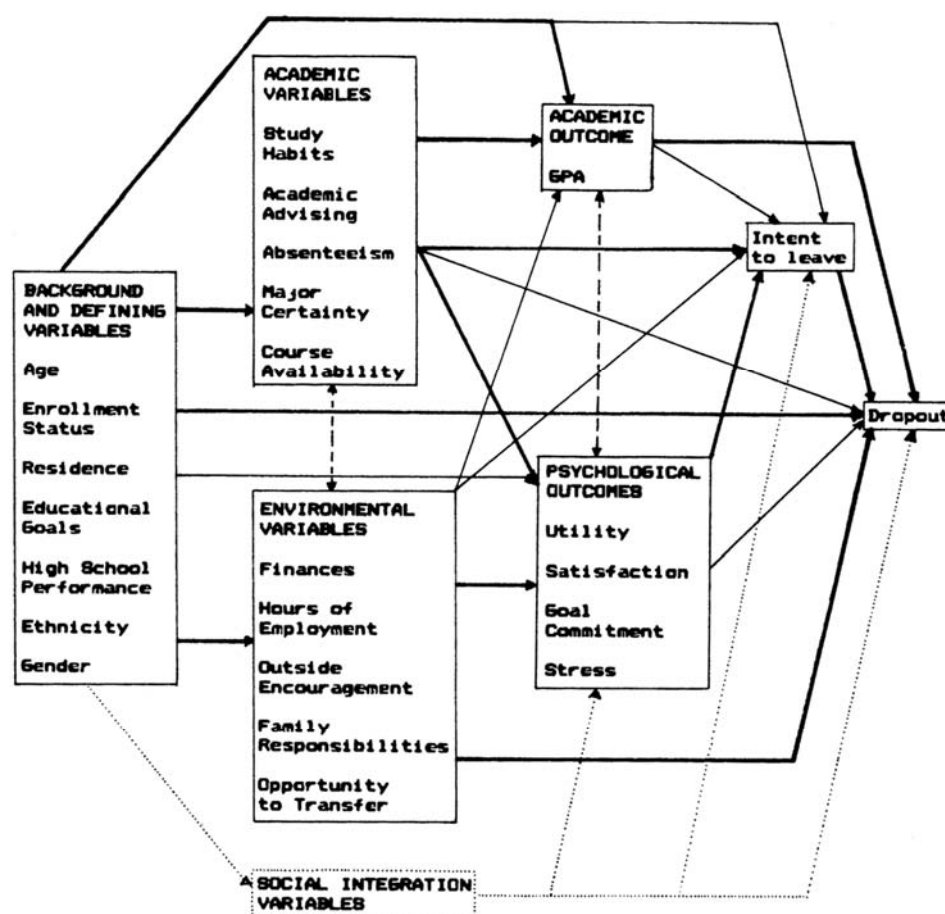


FIGURE 1. A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition.
 Key: → Direct effects
 → Direct effects presumed most important
 ↔ Compensatory interaction effects
 ··· Possible effects

Figure 2. A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition (Bean & Metzger, 1985, p. 491).

Tierney (1992) questioned the validity of Tinto's work believing that his models are based on an assimilation/acculturation framework. Tierney believed Tinto actually misinterpreted Van Gennep's theory and that his misinterpretation could "hold potentially harmful consequences for racial and ethnic minorities" (Tierney, 1992, p. 603). Tierney (2000) wrote that he critiqued Tinto's model from a "cultural perspective informed by critical theory" (p. 213). Tierney suggested a cultural model that studies student departure in a dramatically different way and suggested that Tinto's model be turned on its head. Tierney (2000) developed a cultural framework with the "negotiation of identity in academe as central to educational success" (p. 219). He believes that instead of the individual assimilating into the culture of the institution, the institution should honor and incorporate the cultures of the individuals. He feels the problem with Tinto's models and others that use Tinto's model as a foundation is that too much responsibility is actually placed on the individual. Tierney (2000) wrote "we cannot overlook the fact that individual actions exist within socio-historical cultural constraints that have denied opportunity to some and afforded others great benefits" (p. 216).

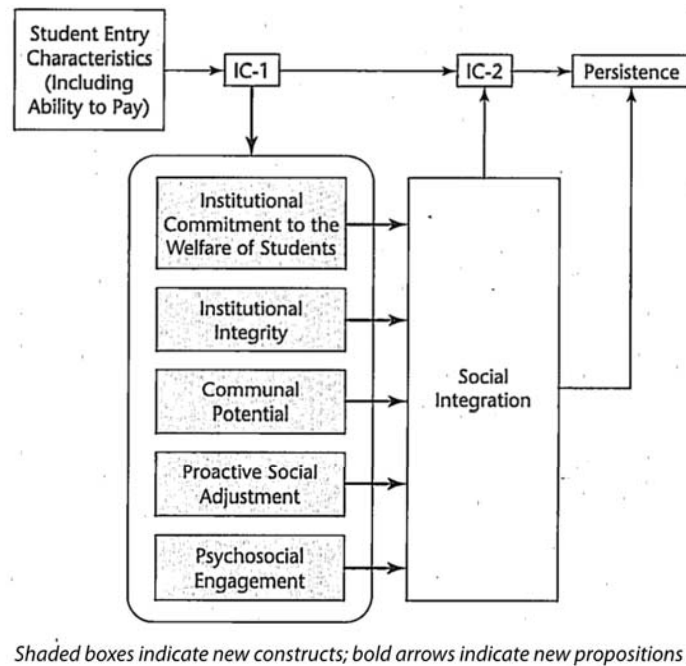
Tierney (2000) designed a cultural model for analyzing student participation in high school. The framework places great emphasis on the interactions and relationships between students, their families, and their teachers. The foundation of his model is derived from five key points: "(1) collaborative relations of power, (2) connections across home, community, and schooling, (3) local definitions of identity, (4) challenge over remediation, and (5) academic support" (Tierney, 2000, p. 219). While Tierney's framework was created for "at risk" marginalized students attending a college prep high

school program in south central Los Angeles, he believes his model is applicable to college students as well, with only minor modifications relative to the students. The primary purpose of Tierney's framework as it relates to postsecondary education is to inform college administrators and educators of the necessity to reorient their thinking about the education of low-income urban minority youth and how educators work with these students.

Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) also recommended the need for a serious revision to Tinto's theory. They found partial support of Tinto's theory in residential colleges and no support in commuter colleges. For this reason, Braxton et al. (2004) believed two separate theories for these distinctly different populations were needed and created a revised version of Tinto's (1975) interactionalist theory for residential colleges and universities and a new theory of student departure for commuter colleges and universities. See Figure 3. The new theory posited that commuter students lack opportunities for social integration and the external environment plays an extremely important role, believing that students' obligations to work and to care for family members often create conflicts.

Braxton et al. (2014) formulated an updated revision to the two previous models of Braxton et al. (2004) and noted the need for the development of theoretical concepts incorporating economic, psychological, sociological, and organizational perspectives. Because this study focuses on students in the community college, I am only exhibiting the theory of student persistence in commuter colleges and universities. See Figure 4.

Braxton Braxton, Hircshy, and McClendon (2004)
revision of Tinto's 1975 interactionalist theory for
student departure in residential colleges and
universities.



Braxton Braxton, Hircshy, and McClendon (2004)
new theory of student departure in commuter
colleges and universities.

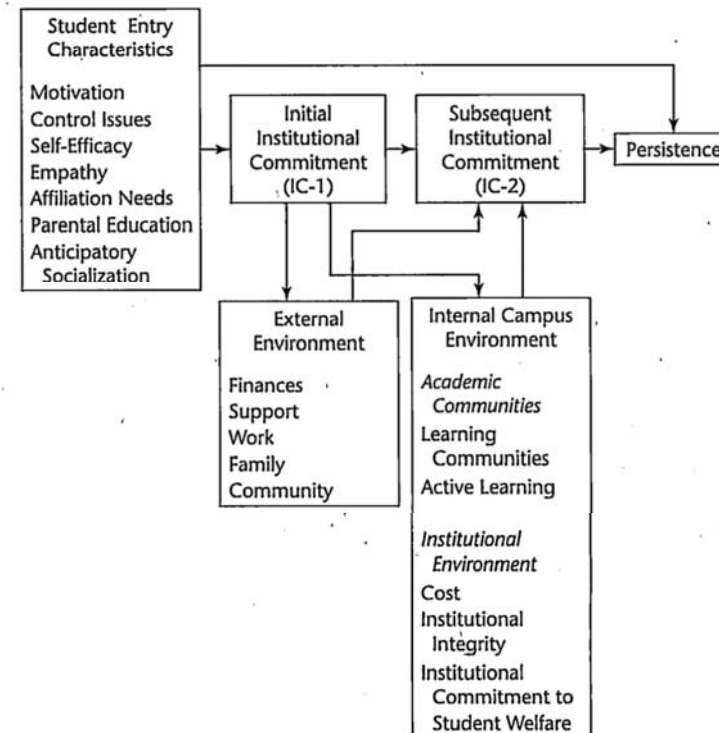


Figure 3. Braxton et al.'s (2004) Revision of Tinto's 1975 Interactionalist Theory for Student Departure in Residential Colleges and Universities and Braxton et al.'s New Theory of Student Departure in Commuter Colleges and Universities (pp. 30, 43).

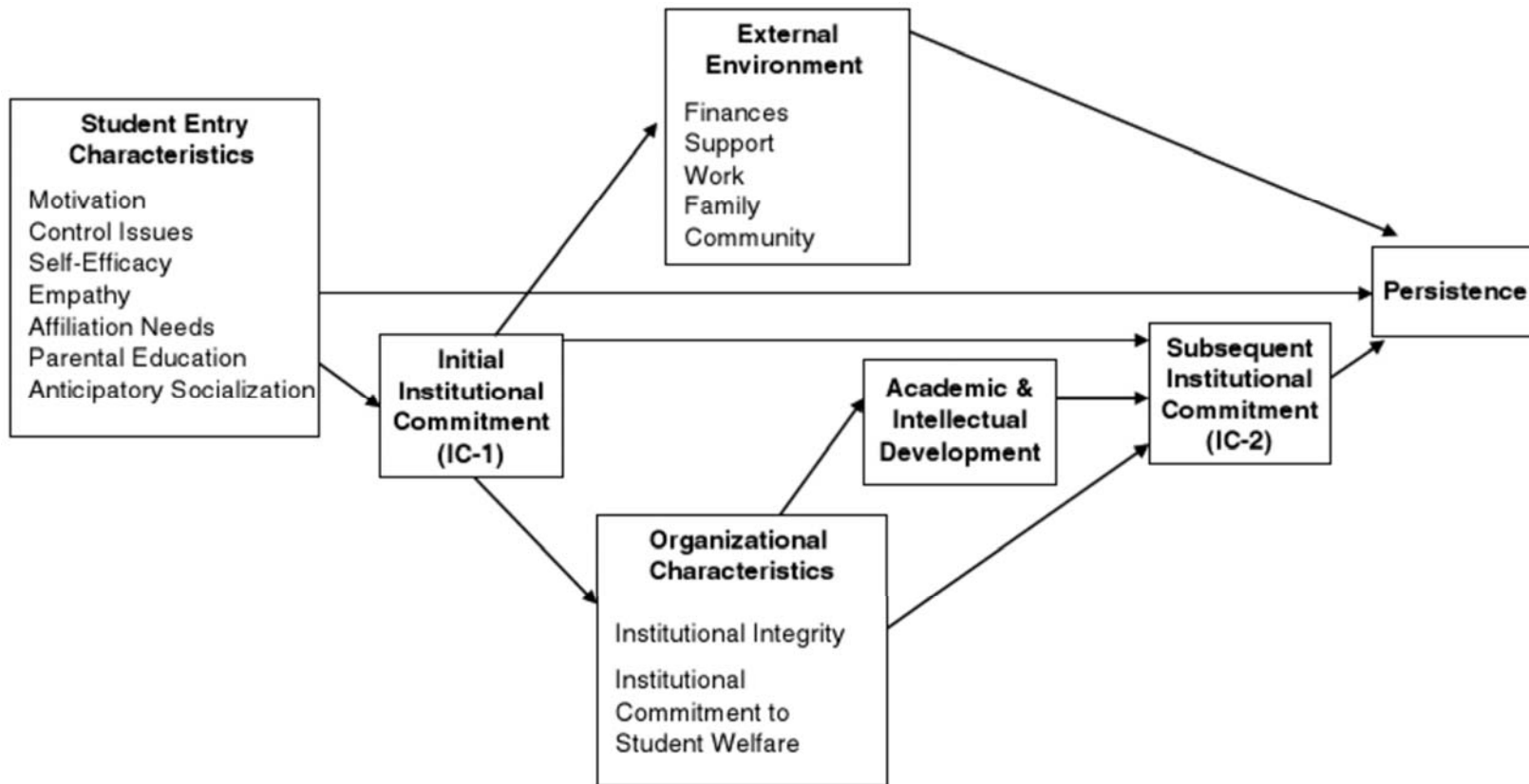


Figure 4. Theory of Student Persistence in Commuter Colleges and Universities (Braxton et al., 2014, p. 111).

A plethora of research has been performed on the role of pedagogy, curriculum, and classroom activities as a predictor of student learning, but there is very little research on the role of the classroom experience as it applies to persistence. With a few exceptions, these two fields of inquiry, student learning and student persistence, have not previously been connected (Tinto, 1997). In fact, Tinto's (1997) study is one of the first studies exploring the educational character of student persistence. He acknowledges that the classroom is quite likely the only place where social and academic integration take place for commuter students.

Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000) have also begun to focus on the relationship between pedagogy and persistence. Both Tinto's (1997) study on learning communities and the study by Braxton et al. (2000) on the influence of active learning focus on how classroom pedagogy and curriculum shape persistence. Tinto (1997) noted that there has been very little research that explores the connection between the experiences in the classroom and student persistence. Figure 5 shows Tinto's 1993 modified theory of student persistence, in which institutional experiences in classes, labs, and studios play a major role in student persistence.

Tinto (2006) agrees with other researchers that much of his own earlier research left out "the experiences of students in other types of institutions, two-and four-year, and of students of different gender, race, ethnicity, income, and orientation" (p. 3). Looking at persistence research over the past forty years, he believes three of the most important findings are: (1) the importance of studying the experiences of students with varying backgrounds, (2) recognizing student retention varies depending on the type of

institution, and (3) the importance of understanding student retention as a complex phenomenon, which now address sociological, psychological, and economic realms.

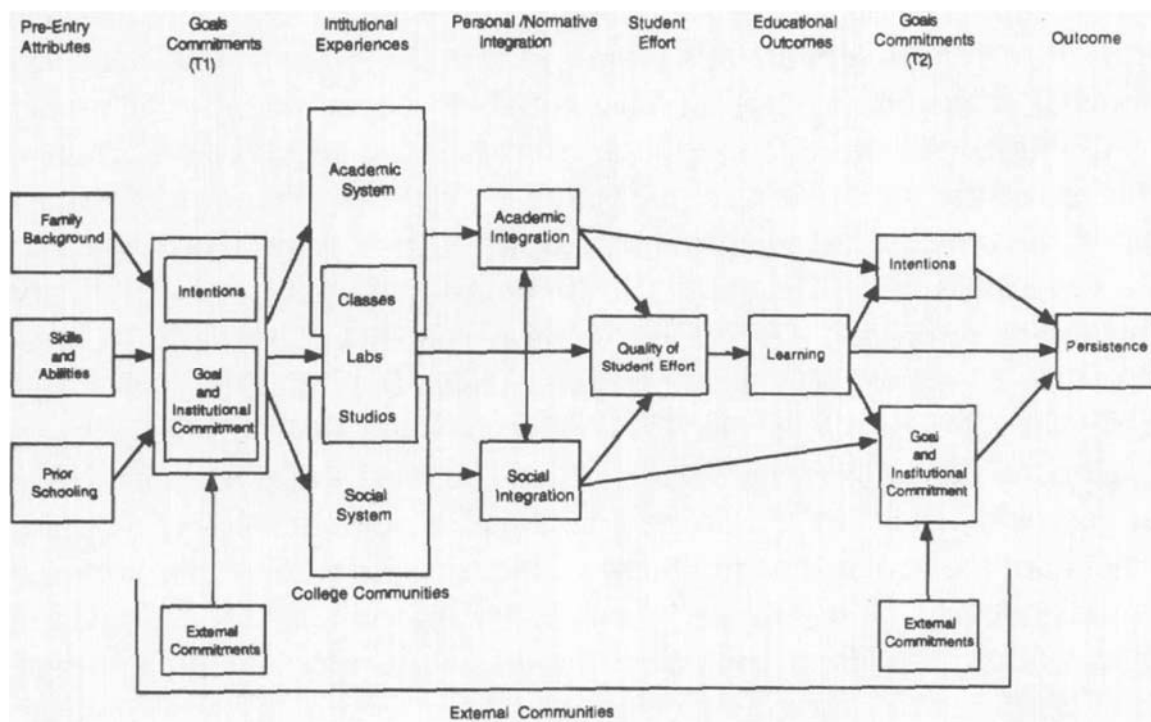


Figure 5. Suggested Model Linking Classrooms, Learning, and Persistence (Tinto, 1997, p. 615).

Tinto summed up the history of persistence research noting how persistence, 40 years ago, was seen as “the reflection of individual attributes, skills, and motivation” (Tinto, 2006, p. 2). Failure to persist rested solely on the shoulders of the individual. However, retention perspectives changed dramatically during the 70s and 80s and the focus on the individual was replaced with the role of the environment, specifically the institution. Persistence models during this time period focused on the academic and social systems of the institution. Central to these models was the “concept of integration and the

patterns of interaction between the student and other members of the institution” (Tinto, 2006, p. 3). However, retention efforts were primarily seen as the responsibility of student affairs professionals and the role that faculty plays was not addressed.

In earlier research, however, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) found student/faculty involvement to be a key factor concerning persistence, but focused more on contact outside the classroom. Another dominant theoretical model is Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement. He theorized that students with more interaction with faculty and/or peers in or outside the classroom are more likely to persist. His theory suggests that students learn when they are involved. While Tinto’s model is similar to Astin’s involvement theory, Tinto’s model is a much more detailed theoretical model.

Reason (2009) noted the current persistence literature revealed very little research that explores the connection between classroom experiences and persistence. He writes, “Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reported empirical relationships between classroom experiences and learning outcomes, but their summary mentions little about the relationship between these experiences and persistence in college” (p. 673). Tinto (2012) suggested that much more attention should be focused on the interactions between faculty and student, specifically, the effects of classroom practices upon student learning and persistence.

Relative to persistence studies, it is also important to note the research that addresses student intent. Researchers Bonham and Luckie noted the importance of differentiating between students who stop out and/or opt out. Bonham and Luckie applied these terms to students who chose to leave college with the possibility of returning to

college in the future. They also noted the importance of recognizing that attaining a degree may not be the goal of all students (Metz, 2002). Sturtz (1995, as cited in Metz, 2002) suggested leaving college is not necessarily a negative experience. In my experience teaching in the community college system and interacting with students, I have found that some students may only be interested in taking limited coursework, possibly for a job-related goal or simply for personal enrichment.

In the most recent literature the role of faculty/student interaction as it relates to student persistence has become a common thread. In 2006, Tinto again suggests that much more attention should be focused on the interactions between faculty and student, specifically, on the effects of classroom practices upon student learning and persistence. Tinto (2012) notes how most institutional retention efforts are still neglecting the classroom. He also points out that 75% of college students do not live on campus, and that the “experience of college is primarily the experience of the classroom” (p. 6). Clearly, from all of these studies it can be seen that more research is needed on the relationship between the classroom and persistence.

Concluding, it would be unfair to say that Tinto’s work has not contributed greatly to our understanding of student departure and persistence, as his work has been the foundation and springboard for almost all of the research completed on college student departure to date. As in the case of any great researcher, over the years his work has evolved as he has made modifications to his theories and as he has continued to contribute scholarly research based on the critiques of his work. However, I think it is important to note that all of the models that extend and synthesize his work focus more

on the factors that cause dropout behaviors, while I am more focused on why students stay, or more specifically what conditions and experiences lead to persistence.

Summary

This chapter contrasts the differences between methodological and substantive theories and how those frameworks affect this body of work. I also explain why I chose to avoid applying a substantive theoretical framework at the beginning of my research and my rationale for using the grounded theory methodology to generate a theory instead of framing my study with an existing one. This chapter also addressed how my quest for social justice and how my belief in critical pedagogy color the lens in which I view the research.

To situate this study in context I also cover the history of the GED. Over the past sixty years there have been five generations of GED tests. Passing a series of five proficiency tests covering English grammar, literature, social studies, natural science and mathematics gives those who did not complete high school the opportunity to earn their high school equivalency credential.

Because this study looks at the GED earner enrolled in the community college, this chapter also includes a brief history of the community college and the two competing schools of thought on its purpose. Community colleges have been in existence since the early 1900s and were initially designed to provide general liberal arts studies, but later shifted to a focus on the needs of the community, and in addition, started offering job-training programs. This change in direction created two varying schools of thought on the purpose of community colleges. One school of thought appeals to the principles of a

democratic education, the other appeals to a fiscal perspective that sees the community college as an opportunity to provide labor for the workforce. In 2016 there are over 1600 community colleges enrolling over eight million students.

Because this study addresses specifically the persistence of GED earners in postsecondary education, the most dominant persistence theories are covered in this chapter. Several theories inform my thinking including the most cited and empirically tested persistence theory in the study of college student persistence, which is Vincent Tinto's theory of retention (1975, 1993). Other dominant persistence theories covered include the work of Astin's (1984) developmental theory of student involvement, Bean and Metzger's (1985) causal model of student attrition for the non-traditional college student, and Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda's (1992) suggested convergent theory of both Bean and Metzger's models and Tinto's model. I am also informed by the criticisms of Tinto's model including the work of (Tierney, 1992, 2000), and Braxton et al. (2000, 2004, 2014). Braxton et al. recommend the need for a serious revision to Tinto's theory for residential colleges and universities and a completely new theory for commuter colleges.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is not a theory in and of itself, but a methodology for developing theory that is based or “grounded” in the data. To inform my research I studied the differences between three approaches: the original grounded theory approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory as conceived by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as Strauss broke away from Glaser, and the constructivist grounded theory of Kathy Charmaz (2012).

Grounded theory, as conceived by Glaser and Strauss (1967), relies chiefly on using qualitative methods to develop theory. The foundation of this method rests in searching through data to find theories that emerge from the data in an inductive method of research. Once a general area of research has been determined, data is collected qualitatively, and then studied to see if a theory or theories emerge from the data. Once a tentative theory is found, more data is collected, and a comparative analysis method is used to ground the theory. This process is repeated over and over, using various areas for research, which might include different geographical areas, different questions in the same area, library research, research into theories others have offered, conversations, serendipitously found information, and even quantitative studies until a point of data saturation has been achieved, grounding the theory in the data. Glaser and Strauss (1967)

call this finding various “slices of data” (p. 68). Once the point of data saturation has occurred, as determined by the researcher, no further data collection of that theory is necessary. However, sometimes other theories have been created as a result of the data collection, and then these theories are researched in the same way (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Glaser and Strauss distinguished between formal theory, which is written in very general terms so that it can be applied to many situations, and substantive theory, which is theory that covers a very specific area. Most grounded theory is substantive, and Glaser and Strauss believe this is more useful theory, because it makes sense to those who actually use the theory in practical applications. With further research in many areas related to the substantive theory, sometimes formal theory can emerge from the grounded theory, but this is not generally the purpose. Glaser and Strauss believe that the problem with starting with a formal theory and then finding the data is that often researchers try to make the data fit the theory.

One advantage of grounded theory in data collection is that once a tentative theory has evolved from the data, this enlightens and directs further data collection, so that searching through mountains of data becomes more purposeful and only data which assists in the development of the theory is needed. Glaser and Strauss caution against using data to verify theory and instead use the data to develop a theory. For example, they believe a literature review should occur *after* the theory has emerged from the data. However, they point out that researchers will be aware of theories, other studies, and general literature relating to the area under consideration. This is not a problem as long as

the researcher does not let this knowledge impinge on his or her data collection and he or she keeps an open mind to developing new theory from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Sampling described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is called theoretical sampling, as opposed to statistical sampling. “Theoretical sampling is done in order to discover categories and their properties, and to suggest the interrelationships into a theory” (p. 62). This means that coding and analysis of data should occur concurrently with data collection. They acknowledge that bias will occur in data collection, but believe through research, different ways of knowing about a category “tend to reconcile themselves as the analyst discovers the underlying causes of variation” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 68). “As everyone knows, different people in different positions may offer as ‘the facts’ very different information about the same subject, and they vary that information considerably when talking to different people” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 67). Theoretical sampling to develop theory can also include library research, since there may be useful data on the topic which has already been collected (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Today, Glaser and Strauss’s methods are referred to as classic grounded theory. The primary focus is on the emergence of theory from the data. This methodology attempts to answer why questions, seeking explanation and prediction. Glaser and Strauss’s research emphasized generality and objectivity, and their version of grounded research theory focused on the emergence of method and content during the research process versus its preconception before the research process begins (Charmaz, 2012).

By the 1980s Strauss and Glaser had parted ways and their differences in approach were evident when Strauss and Corbin (1998) published *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Strauss and Corbin began to focus on a somewhat different approach, yet they still called their methodology grounded theory. Their book is often referred to as a how-to book for novice researchers. Glaser (1992) asked for a retraction of their book due to his belief that Strauss and Corbin (1990) forced data to form theory, which he believed made it full conceptual description. Therefore, according to Glaser their methods did not allow for theory to emerge from the data, and should not be classified as grounded theory. Regardless of the differences in their methodology, both theorists align themselves with a positivist approach. Charmaz (2012) believes we must move away from grounded theory's positivist origins and incorporate many of the methods and questions posed by constructivists.

Constructivist Grounded Theory

Charmaz (2012) states, "My version of grounded theory returns to the classic statements of the past century and reexamines them through a methodological lens of the present century" (p. xi). Charmaz (2012) learned grounded theory from Glaser in multiple graduate seminars and Anselm Strauss was her dissertation chair. She writes Strauss, "kept tabs on my work from the day of our first meeting until his death in 1996" (p. xii). Charmaz notes that using grounded theory can help researchers make their work more "insightful and incisive" regardless of whether they choose to use "ethnographic stories, biographical narratives, or qualitative analyses of interviews" (p. xii). She believes that

all theory interprets the world rather than being an exact picture of the real world.

Charmaz's (2012) constructivist approach makes the following assumptions:

(1) Reality is multiple, processual, and constructed—but constructed under particular conditions; (2) the research process emerges from interaction; (3) it takes into account the researcher's positionality, as well as that of the research participants; (4) the researcher and researched co-construct the data—data are a product of the research process, not simply observed objects of it. Researchers are part of the research situation, and their positions, privileges, and perspectives, and interactions affect it. (p. 402)

Because I align myself with the constructivist paradigm, I intend to follow more closely the methodological paradigm associated with constructivist grounded theory.

Research Methods

To generate substantive theory, Creswell (1998) notes, “one-on-one interviews, focus group interviews, and participant observation” (p. 33) are the primary sources of data for grounded theorists. This section discusses the particular methodological procedures most often used in a grounded theory study. I explain the sampling procedures I used to select my research participants and give an explanation for the methods I used to collect data, and describe the data analysis I employed in my research.

Research Participants

In a grounded theory study the most common strategy for selecting participants is to employ theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling requires the researcher to select participants through evolving theoretical constructs in one's research (Patton, 2002). I used purposive sampling methods to recruit participants to interview who have experienced the phenomenon, persistence. To uncover the educational experiences of

GED earners in the community college, I recruited adult participants who had earned their GED or similar high school equivalency credential and also successfully earned their associate degree in graphic design in the community college where I teach.

I interviewed a total of 13 participants. Each interview lasted a minimum of one hour and a few went as long as two hours. The location of the interviews needed to be a space that was private and quiet, so I gave the participants the choice of coming to my office at the college, or I offered to meet them at their home. Most participants chose to do the interviews at my office, a few interviews took place in a quiet room on campus, one chose her home, and one interview was performed over Skype.

I started with Kevin because he was working at the college. It was a slow day, a late Friday afternoon, and there were no students in the computer lab, so he agreed to be my first participant. His interview took place in the computer lab. After analyzing Kevin's interview and finding out that he had gone to KCC and earned a degree before coming to PCC, I wanted to interview other participants who had postsecondary experiences at other institutions prior to coming to PCC. Because Kat and Rachel had also gone to other community colleges prior to attending PCC, I interviewed them next. Kat and Rachel also transferred to four-year institutions after PCC, as did Andrew. These varying educational institutions were the initial deciding factors for the order in which I interviewed the participants and allowed me to make comparisons of the conditions and experiences of the many different institutions as well as their experiences in a variety of classrooms. These institutions included high schools, community colleges, both at PCC and other community colleges, and a few four-year universities as well. What I learned

from transcribing and analyzing each interview not only allowed me to document the experiences of each individual participant, but also assisted me in seeing the differences and similarities in their experiences. The analysis also led me to ask additional questions I had not initially conceived. In addition, I also performed numerous member checks throughout the various stages of the data analysis process. After the transcriptions of the interviews, I wrote the story of each individual's experience and then shared with them the write up of their unique story and asked if I had made any mistakes in the telling of their story, or if there were any concerns with my understandings. I completed member checks concerning the participants' background stories, and any additional places in the dissertation where I discussed the participants or used the participants' words. As the data analysis process continued I created a secret Facebook page so the participants and I could continue to communicate. The additional conversations impacted some of the findings in the study. I also requested the participants' thoughts and feedback concerning the grounded theory that was formulated.

Presented below is a brief portrait of the participants. However, the order in which the participants are introduced is chronological and starts with the first semester I started teaching at PCC. I give a much more detailed background story of each one of the participants in Chapter IV—Participant Profiles. Pseudonyms have been applied.

(1) Andrew. Andy is a white, heterosexual, male. I only taught Andy for one semester. My first semester teaching at PCC, was his last semester and he was in my portfolio class. Andy was 19 when he entered the community college, and he took general education classes for two years before entering the Advertising & Graphic Design

program at age 21. He took the standard two years to finish the program and graduated with a 3.4 grade point average. He transferred to a four-year institution, but only attended for one year. He has been working in the field of residential remodeling and repair since graduating from our program in 2001.

(2) Jose. Jose is a Hispanic, heterosexual, male from Mexico. He came to the U.S. when he was 20 and enrolled in our program when he was 23. He took three years to finish the program and graduated in the summer of 2005 with a 3.2 grade point average. After working fulltime in the field of graphic design for several years, he decided to leave that position and start his own graphic design freelance business. During this time period, he also taught part-time for us for three years starting in the Fall of 2011. At the end of the Fall semester in 2014, he was offered another fulltime position in the field again, but this time as a senior graphic designer for a gaming company where he still remains today. He also still continues with his freelance business as well.

(3) Zachary. Zachary is a white, gay, male. He was 18 when he entered the program. He took three years to finish the program because his mother passed away in the middle of the program, and he took a semester off. He graduated with a 3.2 grade point average. His high school equivalency is from an online high school, but he is still coded in the community college system as a GED earner. After graduating Zach took some additional general education classes with the idea that he might want to transfer to a four-year institution. At present, however, he has not returned to school. After graduation from the Advertising & Graphic Design program, he decided he was not interested in working in the field of design and currently works at Food Lion.

(4) Allen. Allen is a white, heterosexual, male. He was 19 when he entered the program. He took three years to finish the program and graduated with a 2.4 grade point average. Allen has been working in the field fulltime since right before his graduation in the Spring of 2008. This past Fall of 2015 he accepted a fulltime teaching position at one of the local high schools teaching graphic design.

(5) Leigh. Leigh is a white, heterosexual, female. She enrolled in the college in the Spring of 2007, at the age of 21, and took general education classes that Spring and Summer prior to entering our program in the Fall of 2007. She graduated the program in two years with a 3.7 grade point average. Three years after completing the Advertising & Graphic Design program in the Spring of 2009, she returned in the Fall of 2012 and enrolled in the Web Design Certificate program on a part-time basis as she continued to work fulltime as a graphic designer, maintaining a 4.0 grade point average. She completed the Web Design Certificate in the Spring of 2014. Leigh also taught a web design class for our department in the evening for one semester while she was working fulltime as a graphic designer and taking the web design courses. She has been working as a fulltime graphic designer since her graduation from our program in the Spring of 2009.

(6) Rachel. Rachel is a white, heterosexual, female. She was 27 when she entered our program. She took general education classes at another community college prior to coming to PCC. She took two years to finish the program and graduated with a 3.6 grade point average in 2010. Rachel has worked for several different graphic design businesses, including being the Marketing and Print Shop Specialist for one of the NC community

colleges. Rachel also worked for our department as a Teaching Assistant and Lab Tech for two years. Since the Spring of 2014 she has been teaching classes part-time as an adjunct faculty member. Initially she taught on campus, but is now teaching online. She transitioned to online teaching because the university she is currently attending is too far away for Rachel to commute back and forth. She transferred in the Fall of 2015 and is majoring in Professions in Deafness, with a concentration in Interpreter Preparation. She has completed her first full year and is on track to graduate in the Spring of 2018.

(7) Kat. Kat is a white, heterosexual, female. She was 22 when she entered the program. She is a single mom and her son has autism. He was four years old when she entered the program. She took two years to finish the program and graduated with a 3.5 grade point average in 2012. Kat has been working as a Teaching Assistant and Lab Tech in our department for over three years. She recently accepted a fulltime position in the field of graphic design in November of 2015, and still continues to work for us as a Lab Tech on a part-time basis.

(8) Kevin. Kevin is a white, heterosexual, male. He was 36 when he entered our program in 2009. He took two years to finish the program and graduated with a 3.1 grade point average. Kevin completed a two-year associate degree in print production at another community college ten years prior to coming to our program. Kevin did graphic design contract work and also worked as a Teaching Assistant and Lab Tech in our Department for over four years. He accepted a fulltime position in the field of graphic design in October of 2015.

(9) Joseph. Joseph is a white, heterosexual, male. He was 19 when he entered the program. He took three years to finish the program. He graduated with a 2.4 grade point average and currently works as a contract graphic designer. During the time of our interview he was enrolled in the Entrepreneurship Program, but now he is not currently enrolled.

(10) Camille. Camille is an African American, heterosexual, female. She was 36 when she entered our program. She completed the first year of the program and then officially withdrew from classes the first semester of her second year in the Fall of 2011. She returned in the Spring of 2012 and withdrew again that semester. She returned in the Fall of 2012 and completed that semester, and then before the start of the next semester she transferred to a community college in Mississippi, where she continued to major in graphic design and web technologies. She graduated from that community college last year, in May of 2015.

(11) DeAndre. DeAndre was 37 years old when he entered the AGD program. He is an African American, heterosexual, male with three daughters and one son. He enrolled in the college in the Computer Programming Department, taking classes for two semesters prior to entering our program. He entered our program in the Fall of 2013. He is currently enrolled as a double major, majoring in both Advertising & Graphic Design and Entrepreneurship. He graduated from the AGD program in May of 2016 with a grade point average of 2.7.

(12) Lynne. Lynne was 21 years old when she entered the AGD program. She is a white, heterosexual, female and has a severe case of dyslexia. After completing her GED,

she was given one free course by the college and took that course in the Fall of 2013 while finishing up her GED. The next semester in the Spring of 2014, she enrolled fulltime taking 10 credit hours of general education classes and two graphic design classes. She graduated our program in the Summer of 2016 with academic honors. She was nominated by our department to compete for an Academic Excellence award, which she received. In addition to receiving the Academic Excellence award, she also received one of the highest honors, the President's Scholarship Award. For this award, she competed with all other academic honor recipients from all different degree programs across campus. Her current grade point average is 3.8.

(13) Wallace. Wally was 19 years old when he entered the program. He is an African American, homosexual, male. He enrolled in the program in the Fall of 2012. He attended fulltime until the Fall of 2013 when he had to drop three of his four classes because of his need to work to pay his bills. He returned in the Spring of 2013 and dropped one of his three courses. In the Fall of 2014 he returned, but dropped all of his classes. He did not return in the Spring of 2015. However, he returned again in the Fall of 2015 and enrolled fulltime for both Fall, 2015 and Spring, 2016. In the Summer of 2016, he completed the last three courses he needed to graduate. His graduating grade point average is 2.7, and he is transferring to a four-year institution in the Spring of 2017.

Setting

The institutional setting from which these students graduated is a comprehensive community college in North Carolina. The community college is one of the ten largest in the state with a student population which exceeds 11,000 curriculum students and 10,000

continuing education students. The college is in the metropolitan area of a city which in 2013 had a metropolitan population of over 150,000 residents.

The institution offers associate of science, associate of arts, and associate of fine arts with a concentration in visual arts or music. These programs are designed to transfer to a four-year institution. The college also offers the associate of applied science degree and technical certificates, which are designed to lead to employment. The College obtained reaffirmation of its regional accreditation through the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) in 2013. The college's student population in the Spring of 2013 was 57% female and 43% male. Racial diversity was 51% white and 49% non-whites. The average age of students attending the college was 27. Over half (52%) of students attended fulltime. From semester to semester, these numbers vary only slightly. This information was obtained from the institution's 2012–2013 annual report.

Data Collection

Grounded theory provides a somewhat prescribed method of data analysis. The first step begins with data collection. One of the most common sources of qualitative data collection is interviewing. I used purposive sampling methods to recruit participants to interview who have experienced the phenomenon, persistence. “Grounded theory relies on theoretical sampling, which involves recruiting participants with differing experiences of the phenomenon so as to explore multiple dimensions of the social processes under study” (Starks, 2007, p. 1375). I interviewed thirteen participants with varying backgrounds who completed their associate degree in graphic design.

The objective of the interview is to elicit the participant's story. "The researcher/ interviewer presents herself as the listener and asks participants to give accounts of their experience of the phenomenon. She asks probing questions to encourage the participant to elaborate on the details to achieve clarity and to stay close to the lived experience" (Starks, 2007, p. 1375).

In an attempt to understand the educational experiences of my participants, I started the collection of data with a semi-structured interview. I continued to add participants to my sample size until I felt I had reached theoretical saturation. During the interviews, I asked my participants to reflect on their educational experiences both in high school and college. As noted by Glesne (2011) additional questions will emerge during the course of the interviews. My initial questions asked the participants about their educational experiences in high school and college. I asked questions about their interactions with their teachers and their classmates, about types of support, about their decision to enroll in higher education and why they choose their particular program of study. I asked them about their most successful periods and their most memorable experiences, as well as their biggest challenges and struggles. My intent in asking these questions, which also included questions about their background, was to capture the various portraits of GED earners who were successful in earning their associate degree and to better understand their educational experiences and their successes.

Data Analysis

The second step is the analysis of the collected data. I analyzed the data of each interview prior to performing the subsequent interviews. After the first interview, I wrote

my initial thoughts in my reflexivity journal and then transcribed the interview. After several interviews, I also referred back to the literature concerning persistence. I then coded and analyzed the data using the constructivist grounded theory approach.

Constructivist grounded theory primarily follows the grounded theory approach laid out by Strauss and Corbin (1998), but additionally applies a constructivist lens. Grounded theory calls for a constant comparison method of coding and analyzing data through three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Strauss and Corbin (1998) explain,

During *open coding* data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences. Events, happenings, objects, and actions/interactions that are found to be conceptually similar in nature or related in meaning are grouped under more abstract concepts termed “categories.” (p. 102)

The purpose of *axial coding* is to begin the process of reassembling data that were fractured during open coding. In axial coding, categories are related to their subcategories to form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena. (p. 124)

Selective coding is the process of integrating and refining the theory. (p. 143)

After coding my data, I revisited my reflexivity journal and further documented my reflections and analysis. Ortlipp (2008) notes how she used excerpts from her reflexivity journal in her methodology chapter to acknowledge how her “experiences, feelings, and opinions had influenced her choice of topic” (p. 699) and how those same constructs continually influenced her focus on what data she selected for analysis and the interpretation of that data as well. I address how my experiences, feelings, and opinions

influenced my choice of topic in the positionality section of this chapter and I share my reflections in relationship to my data analysis in Chapter V, Data Analysis and Findings.

Data analysis performed by constructivists “describes and probes the intentions, motives, meanings, contexts, situations and circumstances of action” (Denzin, 1989, p. 30, as cited in Glesne, 2011, p. 27). This process encourages “thick description” (Geertz, as cited in Glesne, 2011), where attention is given to the rich detail of experiences with an emphasis on social and historical contexts. The goal of this type of data analysis is to uncover emerging themes, patterns, concepts, insights, and understandings (Patton, 2002).

Qualitative research methods utilizing grounded theory were selected for this study because of my interest in producing a substantive theory that will provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of GED recipients and will tell their stories from the participants’ perspectives. Furthermore, there is a lack of research that addresses the persistence of GED earners in the community college, especially from the students’ perspectives.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research the term credible or trustworthy is preferred over validity. “Most [constructivists] agree that we cannot create criteria to ensure that something is “true” or “accurate” if we believe concepts are socially constructed” (Glesne, 2011, p. 49). Creswell (1998) suggests eight verification procedures used in qualitative research that contribute to trustworthiness and recommends that at least two be employed by the researcher. The eight procedures are as follows: “Prolonged engagement and persistent

observation, triangulation, peer review and debriefing, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checks, rich, thick description, and external audits” (pp. 201–203). I used three of the eight procedures, specifically, member checks, clarifying researcher bias, and rich, thick description. Because I am using constructivist grounded theory as my methodology, the voices of my participants are key. Therefore, it was critical for me to do member checks. Performing member checks required me to check with my participants and to get their opinions of the credibility of my data analysis and the theory I formulated with their assistance. This procedure is necessary to make sure that I am accurately portraying their stories and experiences, and that we—the researcher and the participants—are indeed co-constructing the research.

Clarifying researcher bias must take place at the foundation of the study. This procedure requires that the researcher’s position including any biases or assumptions that impact the inquiry must be stated at the outset of the study (Creswell, 1998). This process highlights how the researcher’s position can have an impact on the types of data collected and the way in which this data is interpreted. I clarify my researcher bias in the section on background and positionality, where I discuss my background as a student, a mother, a significant other, an educator, and a department chair, as well as my position as a constructivist researcher.

In my desire to share the stories of the individuals, I also used the procedure of rich, thick description, which allows the reader to feel like they are a part of the experience. Collecting this type of research data requires a focus on data that is heavily detailed. Thick, rich description reveals the “participants’ views, feelings, intentions, and

actions as well as the contexts and structures of their lives” (Charmaz, 2012, p. 14). I was able to capture heavily detailed data through the process of carefully transcribing each one of my participants’ interviews.

Subjectivity and Reflexivity

Researchers from the constructivist tradition recognize subjectivity as the role a researcher plays in the research process and understand the importance of making explicit the ways in which the researcher is present in that process. This involves recognizing the self in every decision, even the decision as to which research topic to address, as well as which methodological and substantive frameworks to use (Glesne, 2011). To assist in addressing subjectivity researchers often keep a reflective field journal during the entire research process. These journals help create transparency.

Critical subjectivity requires self-reflexive action. “Reflexivity is not a “cure” and even though one can never know oneself well enough to critique oneself, the work of reflexivity is useful” (Glesne, 2011, p. 151). Reflexivity is the critical reflection of both the researcher’s theoretical commitments and personal commitments. Glesne suggests that when you conduct a research project, you are actually attending to two projects. The first of course, is on your actual research topic, and the other is on yourself (Glesne, 2011).

Theoretical commitments address research paradigms and methodologies which are based on assumptions that influence *every* research project, regardless of whether they are implicit or explicit. Often times these assumptions are not acknowledged or go unrecognized because they are so deeply embedded in the researcher’s beliefs about the

nature of reality and knowledge production (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Glesne, 2011). Reflexivity is the process of not only recognizing these assumptions but also critically reflecting on them and recognizing their impact on how data is generated. It is also important to relate to the sociocultural-political context, as this affects even how the questions for one's study are conceived as well as how one analyzes the data (Glesne, 2011).

I used a reflexivity journal throughout the dissertation process to help make transparent the relationship between myself—the researcher—and the participants, and also to assist me in forming a better understanding of myself in relationship to others. Patton (2002) writes, “Reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of one's own perspective and voices of those one interviews and those to whom one reports” (p. 65). He refers to this as reflexive triangulation. Additionally, Glesne (2011) notes the importance of thinking about how an individual is “inserted in grids of power relations” (p. 159), which required me to address my positions of power: for example, my position as the researcher, as an educator and as a department chair.

Critically reflecting on one's personal commitments includes questioning the ways in which one's age, class, culture, education, family, social status, values, and so forth, impact and interact with others in the research process, and then also critically reflecting on the interpretations the researcher makes. Glesne (2011) gives some great examples of critically reflexive initial questions that address the personal: “What in my autobiography led me to this topic? Why did I select each particular person who is in the

study? Why did I form the particular interview questions I use?” (p. 159). Answering these types of questions in a reflexive journal is helpful throughout all stages of a research project.

The statement of my positionality, which follows this section, is the foundation on which my reflexivity journal is based. For example, in the positionality section, I address how my autobiography led me to my dissertation topic. My own personal frustrations and struggles throughout my high school career created a feeling of empathy and compassion for others who found high school troubling. I was able to earn my high school diploma in a traditional manner. However, the students I interviewed found an alternative way to regain their education by earning their GED, and also earned their associate degree. Because of my personal experiences and perspectives, I was careful not to one-dimensionally represent my participants as oppressed or powerless victims, nor romanticize them by missing out on the complexity of their lives (Glesne, 2011, p. 158).

I also used Patton’s (2002) diagram (see Figure 6) to critically reflect on my initial thoughts, my experiences and my assumptions immediately after interviewing each participant. Initially, I completed two of the three reflexive questions in Patton’s triangulated inquiry, those studied (the participants) and myself (the researcher). However, as I worked through the questions I was also consciously aware that my audience will also be those in the community college who are interested in improving persistence. Community colleges are primarily funded by the number of students the institution enrolls and by the number of completers. Therefore, persistence is at the forefront of all administrative decision making. This year, even at the departmental level,

we were required to set goals as to how we intend to address enrollment, persistence, and completion. This third aspect of questioning relating to those receiving the study (the audience) is more fully addressed in the Data Analysis & Findings Chapter.

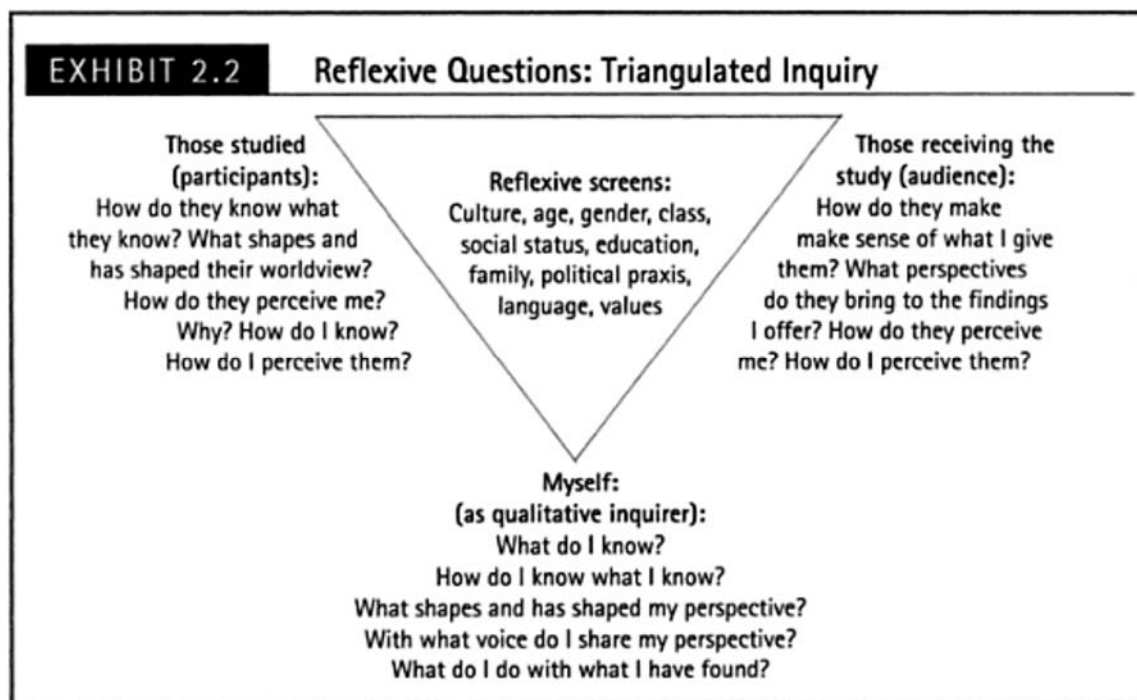


Figure 6. Reflexive Questions: Triangulated Inquiry (Patton, 2002, p. 66).

In the theoretical framework, I clarified how my ideas, beliefs, and philosophies informed the methods I chose. As I advanced in this process my journal made transparent the interpretations I made, and what I chose to represent and how and with whom that knowledge was produced (Glesne, 2011). For example, during my interview with Kat, I asked her to tell me about her relationships with her teachers and she replied,

My favorite? My favorite instructors were ya'll. For a long time I thought you hated me. I just thought that like, I never thought I was one of the strongest students, and I saw how you were with Rita and Mandy. And in my opinion, I

thought they were stronger than me, so I was like ok I understand that. I thought I related more to Stacy. She was my first contact. And so that was why the day you asked me if I wanted to start working here, it took me by surprise. I was like El actually likes me! I must have done something right as a student.

I was really taken aback by this statement and after the interview, I sat with the idea, and I wrote about it in my journal. Of course, I didn't hate Kat. I've never hated any of my students, so I thought back through our interactions and I tried to figure out at what point I made her feel that way, and I really couldn't figure it out. However, it did make me think about how I interact with *all* of my students. I noted in my journal,

In the future, I need to make a more conscious effort to not make students feel like I have favorites in the classroom. I believe this most likely stems from talking more often with the students that are more outspoken in class. Moving forward, I realize I will need to make more of an effort to get the quieter students to talk more.

I also noted in my journal, that I wanted to somehow include this in this dissertation, but at that point I was unsure of how to do so. Much later in the dissertation process, I tried to work it in, but it never seemed to quite fit. In addition, at that point, I had still not figured out how I made Kat feel that way, especially when those were not my feelings at all. I went back to my journal and wrote, "There's something missing."

It did not all come together until re-reading this section and wanting to add an example of how the reflexivity journal made transparent my interpretations, what I chose to represent, and how and with whom that knowledge was produced (Glesne, 2011). My interpretation of what made Kat feel that way was this. I do not think Kat really truly believed that I hated her. I base this interpretation on everything else she stated in the

interview and therefore, this piece just did not fit. However, what I did remember from the interview, but also did not know about Kat, was that deep down she is very insecure. I believe that her insecurities and her belief that Rita and Mandy's design skills were stronger than hers, is what caused her to feel this way. Truth be told Mandy and Rita's design skills are slightly stronger than hers, and I think she realized that I recognized this as well. However, in reality, it had absolutely nothing to do with her as a person, and although Mandy and Rita did have an advantage in their design capabilities, Kat more than makes up for that weakness with her smarts and her production and printing skills, and all three of these young women have fulltime positions in the field of graphic design.

I did struggle with how to represent this part of the data. I just could not find a way to include it in the dissertation that didn't feel forced. In the end, I came to the conclusion that Kat really did not believe that I hated her, and that it was more so her insecurities, and I accepted leaving it out of the dissertation. However, needing an example of how my journal made transparent the interpretations I made, what I chose to represent and how and with whom that knowledge was produced, gave me the opportunity to include it. Lastly, relative to showing how and with whom knowledge is produced, I shared my thoughts of the experience with Kat, to see if she agreed with my interpretation of the experience or if she thought differently. She replied,

My insecurities are something that I have struggled with my whole life. Maybe it was fear of failure or fear of disappointment that led me to believe you hated me. I think differently than normal design students because I come from a programming background. So sometimes I see things differently or would do things in a way that most traditional art students would not do. At times, I felt like this caused me to let you down and that I got on your nerves mostly. I am a very loyal person and the thought of letting myself and someone I look up to down

upsets me. I think mostly I did not want to disappoint you or make you feel like you were wasting your time on me. I learned so much from you and I just wanted to make you proud that you taught me. I know that these are my issues and I have been working on them. It just takes time.

What this example of the reflexivity process highlights is that my interpretation was still incorrect, and that she really did feel that way at that time, even though she does not feel that way now. This example highlights the importance of using a reflexivity journal and completing member checks, and how these processes involve the participants in the knowledge production process. This is why I made sure that I shared my interpretations with the participants, to make sure that I did not make any additional mistakes. Each participant was given the first draft of the dissertation and invited to read the entire document, or just the parts relative to each of them as participants, by doing a name search. I asked for their questions, concerns, and any feedback they wished to share.

Background and Positionality

In addition to the importance of attending to subjectivity and reflexivity, addressing how the researcher's background and experiences impact the research is also an important aspect of constructivism (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). This recognition of a researcher's background and experiences is referred to as the positionality of the researcher. Positionality is the practice of recognizing one's position in relationship to a study and acknowledging that this position may influence aspects of the study, such as the types of data collected and the way in which this data is interpreted. Positionality is sometimes confused with bias. Griffith (1998) differentiates positionality and bias in the following way, "Bias comes not from having ethical and political positions—this is

inevitable—but from not acknowledging them” (p. 133). Therefore, it is important to make transparent my position and biases as a researcher.

I grew up in central North Carolina in a small rural town with a family of mathematicians, managers, and scientists. My mother was a high school math teacher, my father a city manager, and my younger twin brothers excelled in school, enjoying both math and science classes. One of my brothers went to college for engineering, the other for biology.

If one were to one-dimensionally judge me through a series of checked boxes on a form concerning demographics, said person would quite likely envision me as an individual advantaged by many dominant power positions of privilege. Privilege refers to any advantage that is unearned, exclusive, and socially conferred. I am a white heterosexual, born of a middle-class family, raised as an Episcopalian, educated in private colleges and able bodied, all positions of privilege.

However, if one listened to my life experiences, a deeper understanding of my existence would allow one to form quite a different opinion indeed. I am someone who was called racist names and not afforded certain opportunities because of dating interracially in high school. I am someone who often felt dumb among a family of mathematicians and scientists and one who struggled in school because my strengths were in visual arts, not in science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM). I am someone who lived with a functioning drug addict for thirteen years before finally kicking out a loving father and husband from my children’s life and our home. I am someone who now as a single mom with two beautiful bi-racial children lives paycheck

to paycheck, sometimes not able to make it financially until the end of the month, sometimes struggling to keep gas in the car, and food in the fridge. I am unable to pay what insurance doesn't cover on our doctor's and dentist's bills, and unable to pay for extra-curricular activities for my children. Without the help of my parents, I do not know how I would get by.

I am currently in an interracial relationship of six years, and I have dated interracially since the age of sixteen. Therefore, even though I recognize the privileges that come with my dominant positions, I also share in the experiences of those I love living and experiencing life with black and brown skin, as well as being one of those whose opportunities are limited by economic circumstances. At the same time, I am also consciously aware of the privileges I encounter every day being in socially accepted and normalized positions due to the fact that I am able bodied, Caucasian, and heterosexual. I will always be conscious of how those who do not fall into these dominant positions may be affected by issues of power and mainstream ideologies. How I have come to know, understand, and interpret the world is informed by my race, as well as the race of my children and my partners both past and present. My understanding of how financial status affects circumstances is based on my life experiences.

My educational experiences both as a student and an educator in public schools and private schools, and also in the community college system, inform my worldview as well. My performance in high school was average. I did not enjoy the majority of my classes and I struggled the most in the areas of math and science. My mother tried her best to tutor me, and I was able to pass, but it was always a horrible experience. I grew up

feeling dumb and misunderstood. About the only thing I had going for me was my artistic ability, and my mother's belief in and constant reminder of the importance of a college education.

Not doing well in math led to feelings of inadequacy, and I always questioned why there wasn't equal emphasis on all subjects in school. This would allow differences and strengths in a variety of areas to be admired and appreciated. Why do students who simply try their hardest in an art or physical education class earn an "A" for effort, while at the same time, others, no matter how hard they try in their math class, still receive a failing grade? Why are *all* courses not graded on actual performance? And why are our educational institutions today making kids in high school take four levels of math and three sciences and often two math courses and two science courses in college, when there are so many other career options outside the scope of STEM?

For example, the field of graphic design does not require advanced levels of math. In my introductory graphic design class, I actually teach the level of math needed to succeed in this field. Therefore, students majoring in graphic design in my department do not have to take a math course to graduate. They can choose to take a science instead. The majority of my students take either geology or astronomy and are successful in passing these courses. I wonder what effect requiring high levels of math has on persistence, both in high school and college. I truthfully do not feel confident that I would have gotten through four levels of math in high school. I barely made it through Algebra I and Geometry. Would I have gotten so frustrated that I dropped out?

The experiences I've had obviously affect the way I think, and color the lens by which I view and analyze data. Another factor that has affected my positionality is my education as a doctoral candidate in an educational environment that places great emphasis on issues of power, equity, access, and privilege. As a critical scholar, I believe to overcome the current crisis in education, we must place great emphasis on moral ethics. We must have respect for our differences and find ways to make education relevant as we attempt to connect the lives of students to what is happening in the classroom. We must instill in our students a critical curiosity. Through this approach we will help students better understand the world in which they live and the social circumstances in which they find themselves and provide them with the tools necessary to recognize themselves as agents of change.

From my exposure to the works of critical pedagogy scholars, I have become convinced that to create a truly liberating educational experience educators must create a classroom of integrity, where students feel safe to take risks, where students are engaged with content, converse on equal footing with the teacher and with each other, and where the use of imagination requires both students and teachers to pause, to think, and to reflect. It is only by fostering these conditions, which enrich our lives and the lives of those around us, that our educational system will liberate us to join together in ways which make each of us more fully human and all of us more accepted and valued.

Acknowledging the varying lenses that color my perceptions addresses researcher bias. Qualitative researchers accept the fact that researcher bias will occur, regardless of whether implicit or explicit. However, instead of viewing these biases as a negative

component, researchers openly confront them by both recognizing and questioning the ways in which these biases affect the research.

I view my inquiry into educational persistence through multiple lenses. My first lens is colored by the many varying experiences I've had as a secondary student, postsecondary student, and graduate student, as well as my children's educational experiences and my experiences as both an educator and a department chair. I also recognize that my experiences as an educator and a department chair grant me positions of power and immediately bring to mind a polarized hierarchy between administrator and student. Therefore, I feel it is important to paint a picture of the relationships our faculty members, including myself, have with our students.

We are a small department with two fulltime faculty members and six adjuncts. We have approximately 30 first-year students and 20 second-year students. Our students start the program as a cohort and take all of their classes together. I am the department chair, and I also advise all of our students. I am their teacher for three consecutive semesters. When our program was smaller, I taught all of the students for the full five semesters of the program. However, as our number of students has increased, I now teach multiple sections of the same courses. Therefore, I only have them for the first year and a half of the program. However, because we are a small department, I am still a big part of their educational experience. This means that I have many opportunities to work with our students outside the classroom. In the second year of the program, we take our students by train to a National Portfolio Review in Washington, DC. The graphic design club has monthly meetings to decide what types of activities the students want to participate in,

and we also have opportunities to raise money for the students' club through our institution's Fall Festival, Spring Fling, and Summer Splash events; and there are other opportunities as well to socialize with our students through local field trips inside and outside of the county depending on what is being offered that particular semester. Our students call us by our first names, and we have an open-door policy where students feel free to stop by and talk to us anytime. I am not naive in thinking that every single student feels comfortable stopping by my office and talking with me, but what I have presented is the overall atmosphere of our department. I feel confident in saying that the majority of our students would say that we are a friendly, accepting, and welcoming department, and that we value the students' contributions to the overall culture of the department.

My education and my educational experiences create strong opinions concerning persistence as well as blind spots of which I must be conscious. For example, if several of my participants struggled in math, as I did in school, I could not immediately blame requiring advanced levels of math as their downfall. I must remain open to other factors. I can't simply suggest in my findings that all programs should re-evaluate the math requirements in their curriculum, and assume that lessening advanced level math requirements would assist in increasing persistence rates.

Summary

This chapter covered the three methodological variations of grounded theory, and my rationale for why I feel constructivist grounded theory is the appropriate methodology for this qualitative study, given my beliefs. This section includes the sampling procedures I used to select my research participants and a brief portrait of each participant. Also

included is the institutional setting from which these participants earned their degree. I gave an overview of the methods I used for data collection, including the types of research questions, and the methods I used for data analysis, as well as the strategies I used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Chapter III ends with how subjectivity is viewed in a qualitative study employing the constructivist tradition, and the ways I implemented reflexivity. Lastly, my background and positionality as a researcher were presented, as this too colors my research.

CHAPTER IV

GED EARNERS WHO COMPLETED THEIR ASSOCIATE DEGREE

The purpose of this study is to better understand what conditions and experiences lead to associate degree attainment for GED earners and to learn from their experiences. To achieve this goal, I interviewed 13 participants who met the criteria to participate in this study, which was to have earned a GED or other alternative high school credential, and to have graduated with an associate degree. Two of the participants were home-schooled, one earned his high school equivalency online and the other ten left public high schools for varied reasons and opted to earn their GED instead of earning a traditional high school diploma. Twelve of the participants earned a GED, while one participant earned a high school diploma online, but is identified by the college's coding system as a GED earner as well.

For this study, I used purposeful sampling techniques to select my participants. Patton (2002) notes, "The logic and power of purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis on in-depth understanding" (p. 46). Eight males and five females participated. Nine of the participants are white, three are black, and one is Hispanic. Eleven of the participants identify as heterosexual, and two as homosexual.

The following portraits are intended to paint a detailed picture of each participant. Three of the participants, Rachel, Kat, and Kevin had prior experiences at other

institutions of higher learning before coming to PCC. Kat and Kevin completed an associate degree prior to transferring to PCC and Rachel did not.

Andy, Jose, Zach, Leigh, Rachel, Kat, and Joseph had educational experiences in different programs on our campus either before or after completing the graphic design degree. Andy, Rachel, and Kat went on to four-year institutions, while Jose, Zach, Leigh, and Joseph enrolled in different associate degree programs at our institution, including Web Technologies, University Transfer—Pre-Liberal Arts, and Entrepreneurship. Some completed the other degrees and/or certificates and some did not. Their goals for continuing their education in the various programs differ and are explained in full detail in their individual portraits that follow.

Each participant has been given a pseudonym. The order of participants is chronological and based on the year they graduated from the program. The years start with 2001, the first semester I accepted a position at this institution, and move up to 2016. Appendix A provides a list of all participants including their gender, race, age of entry into the community college, the number of years to complete the program, their grade point average upon graduation, whether or not they received a Pell grant, whether or not they needed remedial English, whether or not they were a first-generation college student, and the educational level of their parents.

To give a thorough and thick description of the back-story of each participant, I used direct quotes from their interviews. The majority of the content for these stories comes from their educational experiences in high school and why they searched for and found alternatives to the traditional high school diploma. I also share their experiences

prior to attending college, including being home schooled, or earning a high school credential online, their experiences earning the GED, and how they felt after gaining the GED credential. I also share some of the expectations of being a college student. In addition, I included their future goals, and any other details I felt gave a better picture of the uniqueness of each individual. The bulk of their experiences in the community college are included in Chapter 5—Data Analysis & Findings, since the conditions and their experiences in obtaining their associate degree are the focus of this study.

In the discussions throughout the dissertation the participants use several different acronyms when referring to the graphic design program. The official title of the program is Advertising & Graphic Design (AGD). However, students also refer to the program by the prefix associated with the graphic design courses (GRD) and sometimes use an even shortened version for graphic design (GD). All three of these acronyms are used in the study and all have essentially the same meaning.

Participant Portraits

Andrew (Class of 2001)

Andy was in accelerated classes in elementary and middle school, but during high school, he stopped liking school. He stated, “I just never really enjoyed high school, didn’t like being there, wasn’t a good student. I felt like I had potential to learn but high school and I didn’t click too well.” He shared that he was “kicked out” of high school the fall of his senior year. He explained,

Eventually if you stop going, then they stop allowing you to go . . . At the time I was struggling too anyway because I was thinking based on my grades, I knew that I wasn’t going to be getting into college, or a major institution anyway. I was

thinking that if I'm going to go to a community college anyway, then why am I wasting the rest of the time here to finish going through high school, when I could just go ahead, get the GED, and be able to take the classes at the community college.

After leaving high school, Andy first entered the Adult High School Education Program at our community college, which would have allowed him to still earn his high school diploma, but through the community college instead of the public high school. He shared,

First I went into the Adult Education program after I got kicked out [of high school]. I was thinking I could go ahead and get the degree and then move on. It turns out that if you don't care about being a good student, it doesn't matter where you're at. I didn't do well in the Adult Education program because of attendance and just being a kid, a stubborn dumb kid. Then I wound up eventually later on going on to get my GED and that was with the desire to go back to school. It took me a little time before I actually went ahead and got the GED. I spent a little bit more time learning how hard life can be.

Andy decided that he would not go back to get his GED until he had the real desire to make it happen. This happened approximately two years after leaving high school.

Even though Andy made the decision to leave high school, he always knew he had potential. He loved math, but English was more difficult for him. Once he decided to get his GED, he confidently walked into the testing center, did great on the practice tests, and passed the GED on his first try. He made high scores on all the tests, except English. He did however score high enough on the English test to pass it. He didn't even need to attend any GED prep classes to assist him with the passing of the GED tests. He recalled,

I didn't take any classes for the GED. I remember just going to take the exam. Originally going through middle school and so forth, I was on the accelerated

track, but without the focus, putting the work behind it, it doesn't matter how much potential you have, if you don't have any grit. I didn't have any grit, I think that's really the big thing. Especially younger, no grit. I felt like I had the smarts anyway to be able to pass the GED exam so I went in to take the exam.

Soon after earning his GED he returned to the community college and enrolled in the University Transfer program. Andy's mom and dad had both graduated college and had saved up money for his college education. His dad graduated with a civil engineering degree and his mom was a nurse. They wanted him to go to college and paid for his education.

Andy was enrolled in the University Transfer program for a year taking general education classes that would transfer to the university. While taking a university transferrable drawing course he found out about the graphic design program from some of the students in his class. The drawing course was a class offered for both University Transfer students who wanted an art elective and Graphic Design students who needed it for their major, and the two groups of students took the course together. He shared his story,

So I started learning more about the [graphic design] program, learning about the instructors and was really taking in the idea. I got into the program and then realized that nothing [none of the classes with a GRD prefix] would transfer . . . I didn't realize that it was going to be a dead end until I was already involved . . . at that point I just wanted to see it through.

This frustration came back up during the interview when I asked Andy if there was any one thing that he would change about his college education. He replied that he would have spent more time with his advisors, really getting to know them more. The problem

with not having a relationship with his advisors was that after entering the University Transfer program at the community college, he decided on his own that he also wanted to take some graphic design classes, and he took quite a few before he found out that the credits for those courses would not transfer to the university. At that point, he decided to complete his graphic design degree and then later transfer to Carolina University.

After graduating from the community college with a degree in graphic design, he only attempted one interview for a position in the field of graphic design. He recalled,

After I graduated I applied for all of one position, which I didn't get. I knew that I wasn't going to get it because it didn't focus on the creative side, which I was definitely much more on the creative side of design. I enjoy the creative side. The technical side, as far as especially when it comes to punctuation, not punctuation, especially when it comes to spelling, I was horrible. I remember a typography project that I turned in for typography class. It was just a word collage and it had about 14 words of which at least half of them were misspelled. There's spell check in the software. I always struggled with spelling, and the position that I applied for would have required me to spend most of my time checking over other people's work. It was a pre-press production job.

He told me that one of his classmates was working there, and that he did not even realize this until he was given a facility tour during the interview. He also shared with me that "If she was smart and she cared at all about others in the workforce she would've informed them that I was horrible for the job . . . I hope that she did that and I hope she doesn't feel guilty at all." Instead of getting a job in the field of graphic design, Andy got a job as an entry-level laborer in construction, specifically, residential repair and remodeling.

Andy knew he was going to need to find work quickly and at that time he was really close with a family that were all in the same construction company, a father and

five brothers. It was easy enough for him to pick up a job at the starting level. He worked in construction fulltime, for several different companies, for about three years, but he never gave up on his dream of going to design school at CU. He reminisced,

Even as a high school student I wanted to go to CU. I remember the reps coming from CU talking about the design program and I always wanted to be an artist, I just always wanted to be an artist. I saw CU as this thing that I really wanted to do, to go through the arts program there. I really wanted to go to CU.

At the time, his boss actually had more work than the company could handle, so he was more than willing to work around Andy's class schedule, which allowed Andy to enroll fulltime at CU. Not wanting to be a burden to his parents, Andy wanted to pay for his education this time, so he worked construction part-time, taking off Tuesday and Thursdays for classes and also sometimes worked on the weekends, while attending CU fulltime. He scheduled all of his classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so he would just be away from work two days a week.

While working construction all those years, Andy was considered an independent contractor and therefore his bosses were not required to take out taxes. Handling taxes was the responsibility of the employee, but Andy didn't file his own taxes and didn't worry too much about the consequences. After attending CU for a year, he came to the realization that he was going to need to pay off his back taxes to get access to grant money. At that point he made the decision to not return to CU the following year and decided instead to work on paying back taxes to be able to secure grant money to help fund school. However, after paying his back taxes, instead of going back to CU he

decided to make a career out of residential repair and remodeling, where he ultimately moved into a crew leader position.

Andy stated that he has grown a great deal since leaving college and now better understands time management and how important that is because of being a leader at work. He also noted that he has also been able to use his graphic design skills. He created a logo for the company he currently works for, as well as their business cards, time sheets and the company t-shirt. Andy's real love, however, is working on houses.

He is currently building up his savings to the point where he can flip houses. He plans to buy houses with his own money, make his own decisions, and use his years of experience remodeling houses, so he can then re-sell them at a profit. He is at a point now that he feels confident in his ability to do this successfully. I asked him if he thought he would ever go back and finish his four-year degree. He stated,

I wouldn't say it's impossible, but I'd say it's not probable. I really enjoy doing the construction remodeling thing. I started off in structural repair so I know what it takes to fix a house. I know what it's going to take as far as the different levels and how much the cost of materials are going to be and the labor, plus, to have full control and be my own boss. I'm glad that I'm finally learning now the grit, the determination, having a set morning schedule to get up and exercise, and read, and so forth. I will be able to excel when I make it to being on my own.

Jose (Class of 2005)

Jose's father was born in the United States, but went back to Mexico, where he married and had three sons. Many years later his father decided to move his family to the U.S. At that time, Jose was a minor, so completing the paperwork to bring Jose to the U.S. was fairly easy. Jose moved to the U.S. with his father when he was 18.

His dad, a radio frequency engineer, received his Master's at age 60 and taught at another community college in this area. His mom did some college in Mexico, but Jose is not sure if she got her degree. Jose has an older brother who is a graphic designer. He lived with his brother for about a year when he first came to the U.S. His brother would often ask Jose about the graphic design projects he was working on. Jose really enjoyed that, so choosing to go to college for graphic design was an easy decision for him.

When Jose came to the U.S., he didn't have a diploma that was recognized by the United States school system. Jose also admitted to being a bit of a rebel in high school in Mexico, and told me that he attended several different high schools. He relayed that he wasn't even sure if he ever actually earned his high school diploma in Mexico and thinks that he probably did not. He states,

One of the high schools that I attended, the doors were open all the time. You could come in and out whenever you wanted to. So you know lunch time, you could go outside, or to a restaurant or the taco stand on the corner. So again, 17–18 years old, in a school that's pretty much open, the last thing you want to do is to stay in class.

Because of his brother's profession, he knew he ultimately wanted to go to college to study graphic design, but he knew he had to get his high school equivalency first. He first came to our community college for ESL classes, but found he was more advanced than most of the other students. In those classes, he also learned about the GED, so he went ahead and took the GED tests and passed. He stated,

I don't even remember how I found out about the classes. Must have been somebody said, "Oh they have ESL classes" and while I was doing ESL

somebody said, “Hey GED.” “Sure.” But I don’t remember a step-by-step procedure as far as how to get your GED.

He does remember that it didn’t take him very long, he thinks probably only a few months. He recalled,

A lot of it for me was very basic English, which still helped me, but I was more advanced as far as the people there. So a lot of it was kind of boring. So, I think that is what kind of pushed me to go ahead and take the [GED] tests, so I could get out of that.

Jose also noted that it was great that the GED classes were free and flexible and the teachers were nice and available, and that made getting the GED easy.

Jose felt good about getting his GED. For him it was an essential step necessary to be able to enter postsecondary education. Having only been in the states for a couple of years, he considered getting the GED credential a big success. His parents were proud that he got his high school credential and could continue his education. He worked for a year to save up some money before starting classes. He worked in construction and realized he did not want to continue doing that. His decision to enter higher education was already made when he got his GED, but first he needed to make some money to get a car, buy some new shoes, and smaller things like that.

Jose completed his graphic design degree. He also completed several classes towards a Web Technologies degree, but he never finished. When I asked him why he thought he didn’t finish the Web Technologies degree, he shared the following,

It felt just too much textbook. You know, open your book to Chapter 8 and turn in your work while I’m here. You’re done at 8:00. And I actually, because when I

started that program, I already had experience doing websites, and I already knew a lot of the stuff . . . There was no chance for me to prove what I could do. I remember one of my classes, the project was to make a website. And I actually presented a website that I had done for a client, and got paid for it. It was huge, and everything, and the teacher knew about it, and there was never any, oh maybe you should look into this, maybe you should try this or that. It was like “Oh, cool. Awesome.” And that was it. Again, there was just not much involvement from the teachers or students . . . I don’t remember any of the students . . . I don’t even remember their faces. The classes were also at night, so the people were just there to do their work and then go home.

Even though Jose did not complete the degree, he did complete enough of the courses in the degree to earn a Web Technologies certificate.

After graduating from the graphic design program, Jose worked for three years at a graphic design firm, which he describes as a very “deadline oriented, exhausting first job.” He tried freelance for a while, but instead of making a lot of money, he got a lot of credit card debt. He is now attempting to pay off that debt working fulltime as a graphic designer for a gaming company. He has benefits there, and he sees a future in a growing company. In addition, he also works for a local magazine publisher after he gets off work from the gaming company, and he also does his own freelance work on the side.

During our interview, I asked Jose what he felt were the major contributing factors in the most successful periods of his college experience. He stated that receiving a Pell grant was a huge stress relief since he did not have to worry about finding the funds to pay for school, and he could focus all of his energy on his schoolwork.

I also asked him about his future goals and if he plans to get his four-year degree. He stated,

I thought about it, but it really goes back to debt, and I don't want it. I had to have some work done to my car yesterday, and I was like maybe I should get another car. And then I was like, no, I don't want that \$300.00 payment. So, maybe, eventually. My dad got his masters at 60 years old, so, you know, maybe one day.

He also shared his suggestions for improving the college experience for GED students.

I think as far as the GED, maybe give it a little more importance, I guess. I remember people making fun of it. Oh yeah, get your GED and then go to work at McDonalds. The GED is something. It means something. Whether you use that as a stepping-stone or just stay there, it helps. I don't know, just making sure people understand what it is.

Zachary (Class of 2008)

Although Zach performed academically well in high school, he wasn't particularly happy there. He states,

I wasn't popular, but I didn't have any problems at school. I don't know if I can pinpoint exactly what it was. I was a shy, pretty introverted, keep to myself kind of kid. I mean, I had a few problems with some of my classmates, but nothing major, nothing that made me want to drop out of high school . . . I'm a unique kid. I'm gay, so maybe I was still going through that stage of still learning to describe myself. Maybe it made me feel more awkward in high school, maybe. I don't know, that could have something to do with it . . . high schools are like super packed with lots of people. They are watching so many kids. You've got like 30 kids in the classroom. You know, they are going through their teen years and phases, it's hard to deal with that many personalities, and you're just coming into your own skin.

The one thing Zach detested the most about high school was getting up early in the morning, and he just wanted to try something else. During his sophomore year in high

school Zach convinced his parents to let him join three other friends and attend an on-line high school. He told me,

We all met as a group for that teacher to tell us about it [the online school], because his side job was helping students that didn't like high school. I don't know how my friend heard about it, but the teacher met with us, and our parents, and we discussed it. And they [the parents] weren't real excited about it at first. They didn't want us to drop out of high school and do an online program to finish our degree, but they decided to let us do it.

Zach and his friends got jobs to help pay the several hundred dollars for the online learning package and for the cost of the teacher. He felt that the responsibility of paying for his education made him grow up faster.

Zach enjoyed learning, but he longed for something different and did not want to be in a classroom anymore. He recalled,

My friend found a program where you do an online school, I guess your GED. I thought it was a regular high school diploma, where you get the same thing, but I guess it wasn't. So we started looking into that, where we could just teach ourselves and not be stuck at a high school, you know for like 8 hours a day, just kinda be more independent. So we looked into that, and actually found a teacher that would teach us for an hour or two, and we tried that out, because we were not enjoying high school at all. And so that was just something that ended up being more suited for me, and I was able to do it together with some of my friends.

After a while of learning with the teacher, who would teach them for two or three hours a day, three or four times a week, the group decided that they could meet together and help each other learn what they needed to successfully pass the online high school tests and earn their high school equivalency.

Zach liked learning on his own and he graduated a year early at the age of 17. The only subject that was difficult for him was English. He spent the most time learning how to write essays. Overall he was very happy with his on-line high school experience. He states,

I felt really good getting it [the online high school credential]. Especially getting it early and finishing it. I remember because the essay was the last thing you had to do, and I remember that was such a hard thing for me. I had to get a lot of help. It wasn't even that big of an essay, because you come to college and you have to do like five page essays. It's nothing. But back then, it seemed like a lot, and to finish it, and know that you stuck with it and got it done was awesome.

A year or so after Zach graduated from the online high school he decided he wanted to go to college. He could have gone to the college in his own county, which his mom wanted him to do, but he thought it would be more interesting to move away. His mom ran her own ice cream and coffee shop in the area for thirteen years. Zach's mom had dropped out of school and received her GED. His dad went to college and really wanted Zach to attend college, so he helped him fill out all the forms necessary to apply to college, bought him a house and paid for his educational expenses.

For Zach, meeting new friends and being in a new area was almost like being in a whole new world. He chose graphic design as his major and was very happy in school until tragedy struck. The death of his mother devastated him and he had to take a year off before he could return and concentrate again. He shared that this period of his life is a blur. He doesn't even know how he finally managed to come back and complete his graphic design degree. He recalls,

I lost my mother. It kind of crippled me. It almost made me not want to finish actually. You know. It also made me not love it and enjoy it as much and not want to go into a career in it. It just like totally changed me, kind of an unforeseen outside influence. Cuz I mean I don't do anything graphic design, but maybe I would have if that didn't happen. You know? I may have graduated right on time and gotten a job in the field, maybe.

Zach currently works in a grocery store in the produce section. The death of his mother "crippled" him and somehow made him not love and enjoy graphic design as much. Without that crushing blow, he felt he might have tried to get a job in the field of graphic design. He said his degree has helped with his salary, but he doesn't want to stay in the grocery store business forever. Once Zach completed the graphic design curriculum he started working on an additional degree in Pre-Liberal Arts in the University Transfer Department. He has almost completed all the credits he needs for the Pre-Liberal Arts degree and if he applied to a four-year institution, he would have the necessary credits to be accepted. He has considered the possibility of going back to school in the future.

Toward the end of the interview I asked Zach if he had anything else he would like to add. He shared the following,

I think more awareness for those students that get their GED, that had trouble in high school. I don't know how they could be more informed about college, and what it's like and how it's so different. Because I think it's totally different than high school, it's a different world. And letting them know that in college the teachers want to see everyone succeed. It's different. I mean most teachers want to do that anyway, I guess, but I just feel like you get extra help in college if you need it. You can just ask. In high school a lot of times people are too afraid to ask for help.

Allen (Class of 2008)

Allen had a difficult time in both middle school and high school. He did not get along with his teachers. He recalls, “High school never agreed with me basically. Most of the teachers didn’t like me. I went through some really weird stuff in middle school and it kind of followed me up through high school—the reputation with the teachers. It’s a long story. A couple of the teachers would pick at me. So I didn’t really like hanging around them.” He also lost the majority of his friends his freshman year in high school. He explains,

I was pretty anti-social to be honest. I had a right good friend group going into ninth grade and they split the schools that year. A new high school opened up and they took my whole class almost. Almost everyone I knew ended up going to the new school, and I had to stay where I was. So I was like the only one in my friend group left behind. I ended up falling in with a different group the next year, which wasn’t the best group . . . I just needed attention. You know, in high school you’re just 1 of 30 or 35. There was not a lot of attention going on. I didn’t like homework and they wanted to pile you up with homework. I thought it was ridiculous. I worked 7 hours a day at school, and now here’s another 6 hours of homework to go home with . . . I also had a math learning disability that never got recognized. I hated math. I failed math constantly. I just couldn’t do it anymore.

Knowing that Allen had a lot of trouble with math in high school, I asked him during the interview how he got through the math part of the GED. He told me,

Not very easily. A lot of studying. I kind of got through it slowly. That was the one [test] that took forever. When I was looking for [degree] programs to move up into, I did look for programs that didn’t involve much math, because I knew that would be a problem for me. I took Algebra One like four or five times in high school. I could just never get through it. I was that kid that said, I’m never going to use this. There’s just no point. I’m a logical thinker. You’ve got to explain things to me in a logical manner.

At age 17 Allen was in a bad accident that messed up his back. He still suffers from some of the effects of the accident today. After the accident he decided to leave high school and get his GED. This is what he shared,

The car accident and my friends all leaving. It wasn't just the education system that forced me out. I mean I chose to leave. I dropped out in the tenth grade. I went back again, to try it again, ran into the same crowd again, and ended up dropping out again. I made it longer the second time, but in the end, it was just not going to happen. Most of the teachers again, I mean that first tenth grade year, they just didn't like me. I had a couple of teachers that were just terrible, but you know it happens. Bad teachers slow the process . . . The GED was here, it was accessible, it was easier. After the car accident my back was kind of messed up. I couldn't stand and you know, it was kind of messed up for a little while, so coming and doing the GED was just a better option for me all around.

Allen knew he needed a less physical type of occupation because of his back problems, so after earning his GED he entered the community college to study graphic design. After three years he graduated from the graphic design program. Immediately following the Portfolio Show, and even before graduation, he was hired as a fulltime graphic designer and has worked with that company for the past seven years. When I asked him about his future goals he responded,

See where it goes. I'm a day-by-day person. You know, like I said, it's all about day to day with me. I've got an interview with the high school. I'm excited about that. And to think how much I hated teachers, to think I could be a teacher. My God. I gave them pure hell half the time. If it happens, it would be pure karma. Now you're tortured by students for the rest of your life.

Allen got the job. He started teaching graphic design at one of the local high schools this past fall. I've talked to him since, and he absolutely loves it.

Leigh (Class of 2009)

Leigh earned her GED because that was the easiest way to gain her high school credentials after being home schooled. Her mom home schooled her from kindergarten through twelfth grade, along with her twelve other siblings. Both of her parents have bachelor's degrees. Her mom is a nurse and her dad is a mortgage banker. Leigh shared the following about her home school education,

The thirst for knowledge was really instilled in me when I was a child. As far as home school goes, our parents did encourage us to learn and to think differently and to approach any argument or subject from different angles, like really look . . . if you have a problem . . . to really look for a solution. I would say the majority of home schooling was about life versus actual subjects, you know, schooling subjects. That really helped me in life but if you're wanting to go to school and get a higher education, you kind of need the other half of it too . . . There's a lot of us. There's 13 total. A lot of it was we had to rely on ourselves. We'd be given a book, a course book, and it's up to us to actually read it and do the projects and stuff. Then we'd have to show our parents that we did it. There was some overseeing but not a whole lot. It would start and stop. Like Mom would get really motivated, you know what I mean, so we would do it, and then she'd have to start work again. You know what I mean, just different stuff like that. It wasn't very consistent over the years.

When Leigh was 19 she moved from her home state of Georgia to become a nanny for a friend of the family, who lived in North Carolina. She planned to enter the community college in North Carolina, so she attended GED classes at the community college here at our college. She spent three months in GED classes, attending every day, Monday through Friday, because she learned from pre-tests that there were some gaps in her home school education, particularly in English and math. Leigh explained how the GED classes worked.

It was one-on-one, someone would just walk you through and help you through things, and supply materials. Whatever subject you were having issues with, if it's English or math or whatever, science, whatever it was, they'd help you out. Then they would re-test you as many times as you needed to be tested to make sure that you were ready . . . I think the first time I took them [all five tests] I did it in one sitting. I was fine in science and reading comprehension. The ones I had trouble with were math and English, like writing. Those were the things that I was very far behind on . . . Mathematics is what took the longest. I believe I worked on that more than I did the English part . . . Math was hard for me because it's a bit more abstract. You can't really, other than adding and subtracting, maybe like the basic divisions, you can't really do hands-on, especially when it gets to algebra. It's very logical but also it's very abstract. It's hard for me to wrap my head around it. English, I would just say that being home schooled and having as many siblings as I did, I think I just fell through the cracks on the grammar. We never really wrote essays and stuff so getting the format for that is where I had trouble. It was very simple, we were just never taught that. That didn't take me long to catch up on, but it was something that I had issues with starting college and the GED.

Once she received her GED, she waited close to a year to begin college, so she could attend as a North Carolina resident and get in-state tuition.

Leigh had no preconceived notions as to what program she wanted to enter; she just knew she needed a college education to get ahead in life. When she studied the catalog, she realized that graphic design met all the bullet points of skills in which she excelled. However, she took a year of general education classes before enrolling in the graphic design program, because she needed remedial courses in math and English. There are three levels of remedial math courses 060, 070, and 080 and three levels of remedial English 075, 085, and 095. She placed into the highest remedial class for English 095, and the middle remedial for math, 070. Her first semester in the program, she only took two graphic design courses, wanting to first get her general education requirements out of the way. The next semester she took eighteen hours in the graphic design curriculum, and also worked as a lab tech her second year of the graphic design program.

Personal challenges impacted the summer between her first and second year in the graphic design program. She was doing an internship with an advertising agency in the area. Leigh said the people in the agency were great, especially when they allowed her to work around the difficulties of dealing with the death of her grandfather, totaling her car, and breaking her arm. She shared with me her “summer from hell,”

What is it they say, everything comes in threes, and boy did it for me. But that was mostly external stuff. I’m glad that my work load that summer was light. I think if you asked anybody whenever they have a stressful period at school, it’s usually something happening personal in your life that doesn’t even have to do with school that makes it stressful. For me I had a lot of serious stuff going on outside of PCC that summer. That was the most stressful.

The “summer from hell” also put a strain on her finances as well. However, she had worked since she was 15, always saving her money, and because community college was not extremely expensive, she was able to get through it all without taking out any loans. It was important to her to be loan free upon graduating. Leigh also credits the family she was living with as a nanny for being supportive and encouraging her to finish her education, and the ad agency for being understanding.

After graduating Leigh worked for a novelty gift shop where she was responsible for product design and catalog layout. She was also responsible for the upkeep of their website and product photography. A year later she took a position doing print production at LinkPro and then migrated to web development within the same company. LinkPro encouraged her to return to the community college and get her web design certificate. She took the classes online since she was working fulltime. While she was taking classes online she also taught our web design class for a semester, but decided not to teach again

the next semester, because it was just too much, working a fulltime job, doing classes online herself for web design, and also teaching a night class.

Because at her job she was actually using what she was learning online, she felt the classes were very beneficial, even though she had some problems getting the online instructors to answer her emails. She is now conversant in web building and stated that she was very fortunate to have worked for a company that encouraged her to further her education. She shared,

They encouraged me to take classes at PCC. They paid for them. So they were very supportive and wanted me to go to the web program at PCC, to get better at and have more knowledge with JavaScript and all that goes with web building. That's what I ended up doing there. I'm very fortunate I had a job that also encouraged me to further my education because I still consider it as part of graphic design, in the graphic design field.

Since graduation, in addition to her career as a graphic designer, she married and just had her first child. She has a new job now, creating web to print templates and setting up online store-fronts. The new company allows her to work from home where she can be with her newborn baby.

Toward the end of our interview I asked Leigh what persistence means to her. She replied,

Just persevering, like I had that really hellish summer but I stuck with it. You've got to work through it. You've got to keep trying. I know a lot of people don't have the support that I had, but if you don't persevere, it hurts yourself more than anyone else, being able to push through that stuff and just finishing. I found that has helped me a lot through life, not just with school. When times get tough, just really sticking with it. When you're finally on the other side of whatever it is, you're in a better place, so just knowing that it's not always going to be the way it looks now. Things always change. There's nothing to say that it can't change for

the better. You've just got to stick with it and work hard and just keep pushing through, is how I've always viewed it.

Rachel (Class of 2010)

Rachel floundered in her education for many years before finally succeeding in getting her graphic design degree. She made the decision to stop attending high school her junior year. She should have been a senior at the time, but in the ninth grade when she transferred into public school from a private school, her credits did not transfer. Her older brother, her two cousins and even her mom had gotten their GED, so she knew that was a possibility, and education was not really at the top of her "to do" list at the time. She was much more into partying. Her parents basically let her make her own decision about quitting school. Their only comment was, "If you quit school, you will have to get a job."

Rachel didn't get much support in high school. She did well in English and history, but failed her math and science classes. She got the idea that she needed to be good at every single subject. She often went to In-School-Suspension or had to go to Saturday school because she had been late to class, or skipped too many days of school, and so she felt that school was not working for her at that time. One of her English teachers told her that her socializing got in the way of her schooling and that people like her quit school all the time. Rachel shared,

Well, I think it is hard enough to be a teenager, and the peer pressures of being a teenager. I had a couple of subjects that I was good at. I was good at English, and I was good at history, and of course I was good at art, but I wasn't very good at math, and I wasn't very good at science. So, every time I took a science or a math class, I failed it, and that was discouraging because I wasn't good at every single subject. Well, the way that I think is, I need to be successful at ALL of it, or NONE of it. So, when I would fail these classes, it would be so discouraging that

it kind of just prompted me to feel like, well I'm just not going to do good anyway, so what's the point of even trying. So then I would go and I don't know, party, or do something like that. Not only that but that mindset even trickled into the classes that I was really good at. Even English, so I would do well in English classes, I'd do well on tests, I'd write good papers, but my attitude was bad. And then I guess, the teachers were old, and whenever I needed encouragement, well I didn't get it.

When I asked about the interactions she had with her teachers, she shared the following,

There were times in class that I would laugh or cut up or be a clown or something. I think maybe I was just trying to bypass being a loser from not doing well in school. And that would result in the teacher saying something like, "You're never going to amount to anything if you keep acting this way." Well, I didn't really care. When I went to quit, I went into the Principal's office to give them my books, because I didn't really know how to quit school. So I went in with my books and saw the assistant principal, and I said, "Who do I give these to, because I want to quit school today?" She said, "Well, you need to talk to the guidance counselor." So they sent me to the guidance counselor's office. I sat down and she said, "Why are you here?" And I said, "Well, I don't know. I just don't want to be in school anymore." She said, "You know you will never get a good job if you quit high school." And I said, "Yeah, I guess." And then she said, "Well, ok." And then she just looked at me and she didn't say anything. So it was kind of like, well don't let the door hit you on the ass on the way out. So I just kind of left.

About a year after leaving high school Rachel got her GED. Up until this point, Rachel had no interest in education. Going to college was something that other people did, not her. While preparing for the GED, her GED teacher told her about the community college in her county. Once Rachel passed the GED, she felt more confident, and that she could do a little bit more than what she had previously thought. She shared with me how she felt once she earned her GED.

I passed all of them [the GED tests] except the math on the first attempt. And then for math I had to go back for another week of classes and then I passed. Getting the GED, you obviously feel very accomplished that you've gotten something. I

think it was more like a “whew,” that one is out of the way. There is a certain feeling that you get before, when you’re waiting to get the test results, like am I going to be able to get this, am I going to be able to make it in society? Am I going to be able to get a job? So you have a lot of stresses before you are rewarded with that, and then when you are rewarded with it, there is a relief that comes over you.

After earning her GED Rachel then went to the local community college in the county where she lived at the time. She had no idea what she wanted to do, only that it should have nothing to do with numbers or science. At the small community college where she lived, there were only a few choices like nursing, cosmetology and law enforcement, none of which interested her. She shared,

As soon as I got my GED, I was like 19, I started [college] when I was 20. So probably like another 6 months after that [getting the GED] I entered in, but I didn’t really know what I was doing. In my mind, I thought, for some reason, it literally happened over night. I said well I can’t sit here and do this all day. I can’t just sit here and party and not do anything. I’m going to eventually, you know, go get a job. So you know everybody knows that the community college is in the county. My GED teacher told me I could go there, so maybe I’ll just go there and do that and see how that works. I hope it’s not like high school. You pretty much just apply and then you can go. That’s pretty much what happened. I didn’t know what to do when I got in there. I talked to an admissions counselor and I told him I didn’t really know what I was doing, or what I wanted to do. So, he suggested that I enroll in university transfer. So, I was like ok, that sounds great, and then I’ll think about going to the university after I finish this. At that point, I didn’t really know if that was for me.

Rachel floated in and out of that community college from age 20 to 27, going a semester, taking off a semester, continuously trying to build up credits that would transfer. While there, she thought she wanted to be a Spanish interpreter. She considered it as a career, but when she saw kids translating for their parents, she decided there was no need for her.

Her aunt, the only person in her family with a college degree, printed out the curriculum for the Graphic Design program at our community college. She showed Rachel the curriculum and pointed out that she didn't have to take a math. After meeting with me, as her advisor, she decided the program was perfect for her. She states,

And that's when I came in and talked to you about the program. I really had no idea what graphic design was before I came there. I really didn't. I had no idea what it was. I knew you did something with computers, but I didn't know. Once I went there and started taking classes, then I was like, oh this is definitely for me.

Rachel felt she had finally found her niche. She also found support from her classmates and her teachers, as she completed her degree. Rachel excelled in the graphic design program. As a student she was the President of the Graphic Design Club and received an academic excellence award and graduated with a 3.6 grade point average. After graduation Rachel was hired part time as a Teaching Assistant and Lab Tech for the Graphic Design Department until she found fulltime employment in the field of graphic design. Several years after working fulltime in the field, she came back and began teaching as an adjunct instructor. More than two years later, she is still teaching for us, but now only online since she is attending a university that is two and-a-half hours away.

When I asked her what she felt were the major differences between her high school experiences, her GED experiences, and her college experiences she shared the following.

The freedom to come and go as I pleased. I mean you don't have people that are going to discourage you. I don't think there was ever a time where I got an instructor that discouraged me from anything. In every way they were trying to encourage me. It's different, because in my high school, they just didn't do that.

They didn't care whether you succeeded or not. That's the major difference. You have more freedom in college to do what you want, but that's just the policies because you are an adult. There are not a lot of restrictions. In high school there were too many restrictions. It was too regimented. You have to do this, you have to sit here. It's not like, let everybody sit where they want to . . . In high school I was definitely the kid that needed somebody. If they would have known me, if they would have actually taken the time to know who I was as a person, they would have seen that I was not one of those kids who says, well I'm going to show you, because that just isn't who I am. As a person back then, it would have been better if somebody would have said, look, obviously you're struggling, why don't you see me after class. I see you have potential. Maybe I wouldn't have gone through failures or whatever. I just needed encouragement, and I think the teachers should have done that. And the counselor most definitely should have never said, well, bye.

Rachel is now attending GU to obtain a bachelor's degree in Professions in Deafness with a concentration in interpretive preparation, which will enable her to interpret for the d/Deaf community. After graduating with her bachelor's degree, Rachel is considering getting her Master's in graphic design, just in case in the future she wants to return to her first love and teach graphic design fulltime.

Kat (Class of 2012)

Kat was an exemplary high school student, active in the classroom, clubs and sports, but when she got pregnant during her sophomore year she decided to get her GED instead of finishing high school. She shared her backstory with me.

Oh, I was an honor student. I was heading into AP classes. I was going to be in the journalism class, on the yearbook staff. I was enrolled in all that stuff when I got pregnant. Like, I was a great student. I was in the Chess Club. I did the Sierra Club. I played sports. I had good relationships with my coaches. Oh, but I barely passed Honors Chemistry. I didn't like that class at all. That was a hard class. In the early bird program, I did computer programming, html. I did coding and stuff. When I was in high school, I wanted to go into photojournalism at Duke. That was my dream. And then reality hit.

After taking the GED assessment test which showed she only needed some math instruction in fractions, she took a math class for a month, took the tests and then received her GED. I asked Kat how she felt about earning her GED.

I thought my life was over. I was in transition. I was trying to figure out, I was trying to, I was in mourning. I was trying to let go of dreams and accept a new life, and come up with new dreams . . . So in some ways I felt accomplished, other ways ashamed. Because a lot of people see GED and it's like a step down. There's a stereotype that goes with it. The fact that I got pregnant didn't help it, and the fact that I got dumped didn't help that either. So in my mind I was just like one big stereotype. I think that's why I'm such an over achiever. Trying to prove I did make something of myself, I went so far in the other direction. I know deep down, the world sees what they want to see, no matter what. Just like I work two jobs now. People just see me as a cashier at Food Lion. They don't know I have three associate degrees. They don't know I was working on two bachelor's degrees. Once they start talking to me they realize. Oh, she's not just some dumb blonde, a single mom, who had to drop out of high school. She's actually smart.

Kat got her GED in October, gave birth to her son in December, and started her first semester at BCC the following January. She recalls,

I was 16 when I started at BCC, and I was scared out of my mind. I was in there with 18-19 year olds, and that alone was nerve racking . . . I was trying to figure out my new life, and how to adjust to it, and live with it, and make it work. And not feel guilty. On one hand, I did something that statistics said I would never do, but on the other hand I'm sitting here with a degree that I'm being told is useless.

Just before graduation from BCC, Kat was told that BCC was getting rid of the Internet Technologies degree which she had just completed. She was informed that she should have taken Network Administration and that she would not be able to find a job with the Internet Technologies degree, which is exactly what happened. When she applied for jobs, she was told that she needed a BA or a Master's degree. Kat shares,

I looked for jobs [in the IT field] but nobody would hire me. When I was at BCC, I was also working two jobs. I'd work 5am-11am at Hardees, then go to class, then work 4pm-11pm at Food Lion. And then go home and do like two hours of homework from 11pm-1am and then get up at 4am and do it all over again, while my mom was taking care of my son. That was while I was 17 and 18, then at 19, I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia. And then I had actually applied at WalMart and got it [the job] when the doctor told me I couldn't work. So I lost all 3 jobs. So I went from working 2 jobs and being in school fulltime to not being able to do anything. I hit rock bottom with depression because I'm the kind of person who can't do that. So yeah. It took me a year to deal with the depression and figure out, oh well, I can go back to school. I already suffer manic depression because of stuff that happened to me in my childhood. So I've dealt with it on and off my whole life. And so they put me back on meds. It was now time to figure out what I wanted to go back to school for. And my family has always been into drag racing, and the idea of doing car wraps is what got me interested in graphic design. I wish I would have had that realization, and known that initially, before I even went to BCC.

In addition to her challenges with fibromyalgia Kat feels that she can't easily move away to get a better job, because her son, who is autistic, is rooted here with his doctors and his school, and Kat's family is also here to help her out.

Kat has received three associate degrees, one in Internet Technologies from BCC, and two at our community college: Graphic Design and University Transfer—Pre-Liberal Arts. Kat excelled in the graphic design program. She received an academic excellence award and graduated with a 3.5 grade point average.

After completing her graphic design degree at PCC, Kat accepted a part time position in our department as a Teaching Assistant and Lab Tech. She continued her employment with us and also picked up another part time position with Food Lion while completing her associate of arts transfer degree. After completing her second degree with PCC, she transferred to CU and only had a few semesters left before earning her bachelor's degree. However, due to a flare up of her fibromyalgia, she had to leave CU

before finishing. Because she left before completing the semester, she has a bill of over 3,000.00 that she must repay before she can return to CU and complete her degree.

Her ultimate educational goal is to get her Master's degree. She hopes to one day come back to our community college to teach web design. Several weeks after I interviewed Kat, in November of 2015, she was offered and accepted a fulltime position at the hospital with Xerox. In December of 2015, she was also offered a part time instructor position at BCC teaching InDesign through their Continuing Education division. She continues to work as a Lab Tech two evenings during the week and on the weekends with our department. Finally, in April of 2016, she let go of the part-time position with Food Lion. In October, she informed me that she will have her debt to CU paid in full on Dec. 31, 2016 and that she has decided to complete her bachelor's degree at BU in Communications with a concentration in journalism.

Kevin (Class of 2013)

Kevin has persisted in his educational journey over a period of twenty plus years. He left high school in the tenth grade and completed his GED the same year. After working for ten years doing odd jobs, at age 26, he went to a community college in another county for offset printing. Kevin completed the program in the standard two-year time frame, and then worked for ten years. One of his jobs was teaching offset printing for Vocational Rehabilitation, where he taught developmentally disabled individuals in the 14- to 41-year-old age bracket. Ten years later he came to our community college for graphic design and completed our program in the standard two-year time frame. At the

time of Kevin's interview, he was working at our community college as a Lab Technician and doing freelance work, but he longed for a fulltime position in the field with benefits.

The educational background of Kevin's parents includes his mother graduating from UNCG with a teaching degree and his father graduating from high school. Kevin's mom taught second grade for several years and then worked in day care. Over the years his dad has worked a variety of odd jobs. When Kevin got his GED, his whole family attended his graduation. He shared with me that he felt that he had really accomplished something. It felt really good to him after his negative experiences in high school.

When I asked him why he decided to leave high school, this is what he shared,

Well, I had a hard time getting along with teachers, and students, too. All my classmates just thought I was annoying. I was getting in trouble all the time and it all came to a head when I had a teacher put in her grade book that I made a 69 on a math test that I knew I had done much better on. At the time I couldn't find the test, but I knew she was wrong, and I told her she was full of shit. I got suspended. During the time that I was suspended, I decided I didn't want to go back and I decided to get my GED. I later found the test. I made a 96, not a 69. I was right, but I got so wound up and so fed up, I just flipped out. I was always in trouble. In one of my art classes, I almost set the room on fire. I was playing with spray glue and a lighter, and the flame went all the way outside the classroom. It was bad. I was always starved for attention. There was not a lot of one-on-one in high school. I just felt like I was being pushed through, just do this and just do that. I really didn't feel like I was learning anything.

Because Kevin had such a negative experience in high school I asked him what he expected to experience as a college student and what prompted his decision to enter higher education. He said,

Failure. But it didn't turn out that way. Thank God. . . I just wanted to give it a shot. I grew up around creative people, a lot of tattoo artists. I wanted to do something creative. I was scared to come to [this community college] because I

had attempted a class here when I first finished my GED. I actually came to this program [initially] but photography was really off putting. I have an F on my transcript from here, from way back. After that I just worked at the Ramada Inn doing banquets for like four years. It wasn't bad. Good boss. You know? I enjoyed it for the most part. It was pretty cool.

Kevin ultimately completed two different associate degrees at two different institutions, one degree in print production, and the other degree in graphic design. I asked him to compare the two programs and how he felt he fit in those programs, and to share his most memorable college experience. He stated,

Pretty tight knit in both places. We all helped each other out. Both experiences were a lot better than what I was expecting—nothing like high school. High school turned me off from education all together. I never fit in in high school. I was too self-conscious for one reason. So I was always trying to get attention, and to do that, I did stupid things. For me, my classmates [in high school] were actually more problematic than my teachers. As far as comparing the two [community colleges], I definitely enjoyed being here more than [the other college], it wasn't as . . . I don't know . . . it was a lot easier than what I thought it was going to be, as far as what I anticipated. I thought I was going to get caught up on something and just give up. I was just afraid to come [here] because of what happened the first time. After taking that one class [photography] and getting so frustrated, I just always thought, I'll never be able to go and accomplish anything. I came here the second time to prove myself wrong.

At [the previous community college] there were five of us that went through the program. That helped out a lot. I don't talk to any of them now, I don't know where they are. I've looked for them on Facebook. While I was there 9/11 happened, and we all thought the world was going to end. It brought us closer together. It was on television all the time, in the student union, and everybody went to the student union. It was packed. It was crazy. I think that brought us even closer together. 9/11 was definitely my most memorable experience.

At the end of our interview I asked Kevin if he planned on getting his four-year degree, and he said that he didn't. I also asked him if he could change one thing about his college experience what would it be and he said,

I would have done this program first, and fought through it, as soon as I got my GED, and by now I might would have had something solid. I mean, maybe not, life happens. But I would have come to school and stayed here and got my two-year degree earlier in my life, instead of deciding to go do whatever.

Several weeks after our interview, Kevin accepted a fulltime position with benefits with the county newspaper.

Joseph (Class of 2013)

Joseph earned his GED at the age of 18 after being home schooled since the sixth grade. Both of his parents earned their high school degrees. His father just retired from the military and his mother recently got her associate degree in child-care. I asked Joseph why his parents chose to home school him. He replied,

Well, it got to a point in middle school where my grades were up and down. I guess I was just a mischievous kid and didn't really care about school. So they took me out of school. I was never super bad. I never got suspended or anything, but I would just cut up in class. My mom was on this alternative kick. I don't know what her motivation was. It was kind of like I was never that great in school and then she kind of had her own solution. In the sixth and seventh grade my mom would sit me down with a book and teach me stuff, but after that, I just got to where I could do it on my own. So I liked it. I probably would have been upset if my parents made me go back to school, because I would just be home all day. I could teach myself the school work I needed to do in a couple of hours a day. And then I could do whatever else I wanted. I could earn money, I could hang out with my friends, just do whatever. It was cool.

Joseph shared his experience of preparing for the GED exams.

I took the test at Sylvan Learning Center. There's a big classroom with a whole bunch of textbooks, and you just sit there and read textbooks for hours, and then you take assessment tests, and after you get a certain score on assessment tests, then you take the real test. You have to be self-motivated. It took me all summer. If you needed to ask questions, there was someone there. I think I did take one

class, a math class, like a math crash course. Back when I was home schooled, I would just crash study and take all my tests.

Joseph entered the community college, because he felt that “college is just a standard” now. Because he liked Photoshop, he thought graphic design was going to be easy. He also liked the fact that he wouldn’t have to take a math class to earn his degree. Joseph said, “I literally didn’t know what graphic design was. I was like one of those people who thought they knew what graphic design was—so annoying.”

I asked Joseph to share with me his transition from the home school environment to the classroom and if he felt that he fit in the graphic design program. He said,

Most people were mature, and I felt pretty comfortable after like the first semester, with the instructors and my classmates. I suppose the only thing that made the transition kind of difficult or strange . . . It was the first time in a long time I had been in a classroom. Because you know I was initially in the public school system, and then I was free to do whatever I wanted, and then in college, you have freedom, but then there is also a structure. I think it went pretty smoothly. I did put off all my general education requirements until the end, after I took my graphic design classes. I still stand by that.

After graduating with his graphic design degree, he enrolled in the Entrepreneurship program online. He shared,

After I graduated here, I had kind of a cooling down period, just kind of like doing boring design. I worked at a sign shop for a year or two, then I came back here and I’ve been doing some contract work for a couple of places here . . . This is my first semester [in the entrepreneurship program.] So far I’ve taken like a management class, which has been pretty awesome, and English. They’re all online classes. I did it online, so I didn’t have to show up, so if I’m doing something else, I won’t have to go to class. So online, you pretty much just read the chapters and answer the questions, but it’s informative. The books are pretty good.

Joseph took his classes online so he could continue to do his freelance design work without being interrupted with the commitment of attending classes on campus.

However, he shared that he had trouble communicating with his online instructors. Only one of his four teachers ever responded to his emails, even when he had concerns, like text files they sent for assignments being corrupt. He was only able to track down one of his teachers on campus, but Joseph is used to studying on his own. During high school, he used the home school curriculum and did all the work himself.

Joseph intends to soon open an office space where he can offer his graphic design skills more easily. After his experience of working on his own as a contract designer, Joseph shared an insight which he thought would make the graphic design curriculum stronger. He feels there needs to be a class that teaches designers how to talk to non-designers—the clients. Joseph said that in college, you learn a language of design, but it's different when you go out into the world of work. You have to constantly validate yourself to your clients. You have to be able to explain to them why they should pay you. Another course Joseph wishes he would have taken was public speaking. He felt that would have helped him with both his verbal communication skills and his presentation skills. I shared with him that now students no longer have a choice as to which communication class they want to take, and that all students are required to take public speaking. This is due to the new articulation agreement between the North Carolina community colleges and the universities. COM 231 Public Speaking is the only communications course that the universities will now accept from the community colleges. In closing, Joseph relayed that he didn't really care about earning the

Entrepreneurship degree, that he just wanted the information. In the middle of the first semester, he ended up officially withdrawing from his entrepreneurship classes, and he is no longer enrolled.

Camille (Class of 2015)

Camille attended an all-girls Catholic High School in Brooklyn, NY. She became pregnant her senior year and although she was engaged at the time, being pregnant in high school was not acceptable to the nuns and she was asked to leave. She was not allowed to graduate, even though her parents had paid all of her tuition. Camille said that at that time [in 1991] the nuns were still very strict and even wore habits. They only had one male teacher, who taught Physical Education, and he wore a suit. After having her son prematurely in June of 1991, she earned her GED at a local community college in New York. She took GED classes for a few weeks, and then took the test in December of 1991, passing it on her first try.

Several years later, Camille and her husband moved to Atlanta. After spending approximately twenty years in the workforce, she realized that even though she had gained skills, her pay wasn't increasing along with those new skills, and she decided to be a stay-at-home mom. She developed a small business of creating personalized cards and invitations for friends who were working with Mary Kay and Avon. This experience convinced her that she was ready to re-enter the workforce, so she decided she would enroll in the local community college. By this time however, she had moved to North Carolina, because she and her husband had divorced and she could not afford her home in Atlanta. She shared with me that her ex was not being very proactive about being a father

and her brother was on a football scholarship at CU. She moved to North Carolina because she thought that her brother could be the male presence that she felt her sons needed. When she enrolled in our college she had intended to major in business management. However, after looking through the catalog, she saw that our college offered graphic design and thought, “I actually like that. Maybe I should try what I actually like.”

When I asked Camille if friends or family had influenced her to earn her college degree she said,

I think it was more me. I needed some direction. I can't say I did it necessarily just to get a better job or a career. I just felt like I needed to accomplish something really. As you get older you reflect on some of the experiences that you may have missed out on. That was one that I missed.

Camille enrolled in the graphic design program in 2010. She was in and out of the program, mostly due to the outside circumstances of being a single mom and trying to provide a home for her sons while also attending college. She shared that her brother was always gone with football. “I don't know what I was thinking. You know what I mean? He was always gone. They were always practicing, sometimes two times a day . . . After a while there was just nothing here.”

In 2012, before finishing the program, she moved to Mississippi because she was looking for a change and a place where her sons could get a good education. She had a friend that she grew up with in New York and who had moved to Mississippi. Her friend told Camille that the schools were great, and that's what made Camille start looking.

Camille found a good school for her kids and the local community college offered graphic design. She was able to transfer her courses from PCC to Mississippi. She stated,

When I got there I had so many credits already that, I believe, within one semester they were saying a lot of what you have can transfer over to the web development program. That was one good difference. I noticed that PCC really didn't have that, so we started off with basics like html coding, CSS, things like that. Then it got more advanced. I started transferring most of my energy to the web side.

At the community college in Mississippi she eventually transferred over to Web Development, because at that college graphic design and web development were more closely integrated, even though they were two separate programs. Because she had attended two different community colleges in two different states, I was very interested in a comparison of her interactions with her instructors here versus her instructors at the community college where she graduated. She explained,

I can sum it up. Being here was being treated like a college adult, but in Mississippi, it was like I felt like an older person in a child's class. That's exactly how I felt. For instance, each day in one of my regular graphic design classes we would come in in the morning and have a few minutes to get settled. Then the teacher would start a running commentary that went on throughout the entire class. Great guy, bubbly, excited, but my brain can't work if you're constantly talking. Whereas, when you spoke with us we would have our instruction, direction, any feedback if needed, but then you do your work. You know what I mean? You were always available if we had a point where we stopped and said, "Hey, what do you think about this? Is this working?" It was a very different environment.

The graphic design teacher had been there 10, 15, maybe even 20 years. If you got a graphic design degree from that college, he was basically your instructor, except for your electives of course. Having different instructors at PCC gives you the benefit of so many different vantage points. You don't get that with just one."

Before Camille graduated, she fell behind on her rent payment and her sons moved to Atlanta to live with their father. She had made an arrangement with the lady in the office, but the day she went to court, she came back home to a lockout. She was able to get in an open window and left with some clothes, her laptop, and her books, and went to a motel. Her last semester she paid \$250 to \$300 a week with the money she made doing freelance design work, so she could graduate that May.

When I asked Camille to describe her most memorable experience in college, this is what she said,

Graduation would have to be it. All the time that I had been working I knew what I was working towards, but to actually be there that day and say, I did it. Oh my gosh, that changed my entire perspective personally and professionally, because if you can look back at something, even if it's baking a cake, say you have all the ingredients and you have followed all the directions, but you don't know how this is going to turn out. To get that cake out of the oven and people like it. You want to bake everything now. That's how I feel. What else can I do? If I can do this, what else can I do?

At the very end of the interview, I asked Camille if there was anything else she would like to share with me. She responded,

I think there's something about learning, no matter what it is, that just opens you up to yourself and the world in a different way. I'm definitely interested in going back. I think I will keep on going, even if it isn't so much graduate school, but conferences, workshops. It makes you see more. It makes you think more. I think that's a great thing. College truly taught me how to think, when I was already an adult. Everything is a process. I learned how to think, how to study. Maybe I wish I would have applied myself harder earlier, but aside from that, the experience is exactly what it is. It teaches what it's supposed to. Sometimes you have to fail a few times and get to hate that feeling so you don't do it anymore.

Camille is currently looking for a fulltime position in the field of web design. She is still living in the motel, freelancing, trying to decide on her next move. Returning to North Carolina is on her list of possibilities.

DeAndre (Class of 2016)

In the middle of DeAndre's senior year of high school, both he and his girlfriend decided to leave high school. Although DeAndre made the decision to leave, he was actually a good student. He was just too pre-occupied with everything else in his life to care much about school and was frequently absent. He said it didn't help that his mother never really cared if he went or not. He shared with me that his mom quit going to school when she was in the seventh grade and his step dad died when he was 12, so he doesn't really know what grade his step dad dropped out in.

He explained why he decided to leave high school.

I was dating this girl in high school. She got kicked out of her house and I chose to leave my house with my mom, because my mom didn't agree with me dating her, or whatever. We ended up getting together and getting our own place, which required working while I was in high school. We worked at KFC. We went to high school and most of the time I worked from open to close, so sometimes I couldn't go to school. I ended up getting a second job at the yard mill. The two jobs were killing me and then trying to go to high school too. It didn't work out. I ended up quitting high school, which I had missed too many days anyway. My principal kept telling me to come back to school, but I didn't. Then I dabbled and dabbled in the drug scene. I was not using, but selling. One of my friends put me on to selling drugs. I ended up getting fired at the yard mill job and I quit at KFC. I started making so much money in the street, I didn't see the need for school. I was making a lot of money. I was real low key with it. Nobody ever knew.

DeAndre married his girlfriend at 20, and they were married for eight years. During that time he was employed in a computer parts warehouse and then worked for 11 years with a materials company. He recalls,

The girl from high school, we were together 14 years and I wasted a lot of time with her, because she didn't want to do anything. When I was working fulltime, I was actually paying for her to go to school out of pocket. She started at PCC and it didn't work out. She was going for computer programming. So she went to CU and I was proud that she was going to CU, but she wasn't even [actually] going to the school.

He says that his first marriage was a disaster, but that he learned a lot from that situation.

Several years later DeAndre remarried, and between he and his wife they have four children, ages 6, 11, 14, and 16. DeAndre has always been a family man, working hard to ensure that all of his children finish school. He says that he often shows up at the school just to let his son know that he's always watching him. In fact, it was his wife and his children who were the impetus for him going back to school to get his GED. He got injured on his job and was on disability, and his wife, who was getting her degree, told him that he had no excuse not to go back to school. He recalls,

When my wife graduated the first time, she was telling me, "You got no excuse to not go to school. You don't have anything to do now, so go back to school, get your GED at least." I was like, "For what?" Then she's like, "You got four kids." I was like, "Okay, yeah that makes sense. I got four kids." I stay on them about school all the time, because my mom didn't stay on me about school. She didn't really care what I did or didn't do. That's part of the reason why I dropped out, because she didn't care. All the mistakes that my mom made, I still love her to death. She had her own life, she didn't mean it. All the mistakes she made with me though, I just remembered them. I remember thinking that when I have kids, stay in their life with school. Make sure I stay on them with school. That's pretty much what it was that made me go back to school. I got my GED, I was so proud of it. The last test I had to take, it's kind of funny. The last test I had to take was

my math test. It took me a year to take that math test, because I didn't have anybody to watch my daughter. The one time I got scheduled where I could, my sister-in-law didn't watch her. That made me mad and I was like, "Just forget it." I didn't go back for a while, but a year later I ended up taking the test.

DeAndre did not have any trouble passing any subjects on the GED test. He went to the labs and studied on his own. Soon after finishing his GED he enrolled at PCC in the Computer Programming program. After completing his first two semesters, while he was enrolled in his third semester, his mother-in-law got cancer. His wife, who had just received her second degree, had just started her new job. DeAndre wanted his wife to do well in her career, so he took on the task of taking his mother-in-law to the doctor, almost daily, which meant he had to miss a lot of class, and he felt that the best thing for him to do at that point was to officially withdraw. He was starting to feel like he didn't have the appropriate background for the Computer Programming degree and was struggling with the classes anyway.

In computer programming I was getting some of the stuff. Okay, I got everything up until binary code. When the teacher got to binary code, I was like, "Oh my God." I felt like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz. What in the world just happened? Like I said, it freaked me out. I just couldn't get it. I never caught the first part. When she moved forward to the next part, I'm still stuck on the first part, trying to figure out how you get this.

He attempted to return the next semester, but ended up withdrawing again. His wife was concerned about him not being able to go to school, but he promised her he would work it out.

Walking across campus one day, he ran into one of his old friends and in talking to him, he discovered that there was a graphic design program at PCC that he never knew anything about. He explains,

When I was a DJ and music producer, I could never find anybody to do album covers, so I started doing them on my own. I didn't know that fell under "graphic design" or whatever. My friend was telling me [about the program] and I'm like, "Really?" I went and looked it up in the book [catalog] and I went home and I was like, "T—why didn't you tell me they had graphic design?" She was like, "What is that?" I was like, "That's pretty much the stuff I do." I ended up getting one of the books, and I brought it home and we looked through it and I was like "Yes, this is what I want to do right here." That's how I ended up getting into the Graphic Design program.

When he returned the following semester, he enrolled in the graphic design program.

Once enrolled in the Graphic Design program he went straight through the program in the standard two-year time frame. When I asked DeAndre what his most memorable college experience was he excitedly proclaimed,

I got so many memories. I don't know which one to tell you. Oh my God—just being here is memorable. I guess graduation, or the week of the show. I don't know, it's just so many. The week of the show, that was huge for me. I loved that show. We had a good time. I loved it. Even when I went to the last show, when I was a first year student, and we had to do clean up stuff, I loved the show. It was cool to me. I couldn't wait till mine came. I couldn't wait for my chance. There's so many. I don't even know which one to pick out. Which one is more than the other. I had so many experiences here at PCC. College by itself is cool, I loved it.

And when I asked him why he thought he persisted to the point of graduation, this is what he said,

I didn't have a choice but to graduate. There was no point in putting in all this time and not graduating. Then I wanted to have that degree, to back up what I'm

saying about myself when I meet a client and then also for my kids. Like I said, my wife graduated twice. She has two degrees. I only have one. We were talking about me going further in college.

DeAndre's wife has two degrees and he wants to catch up with her. He is planning to continue his education and work towards his bachelor's degree. He shared,

My plans are to go back to school. I'm going to see how this business thing works out this summer with Ed. We're going to try to figure out this business thing, but we're both going back to school next semester. I want to see about BU. I want to check that out. I also work with my wife. We do a second job. I love doing that job with her, fitting people into defibrillators, or heart monitors and stuff. Everything I do I love. I get to meet a lot of new people and I also get to find new clients. They know people that have new businesses starting, or whatever. I meet a lot of people. I get a lot of work from them.

When I asked Deandre if there was one thing that he could change about his college experience what it would be, he shared the following. "I'm 40 now. If I would have come here when I was 21, then my stuff would be all over the world. I don't know if I have time to do that now. I just want to make my mark on the world." DeAndre's dream is to one day design a logo that will live on, long after he is gone.

Lynne (Class of 2016)

Education did not come easily for Lynne. She had a severe case of dyslexia, and struggled all through her home school education. She grew up in three different cities while living in Michigan. She and her two older sisters were home schooled, because her parents were concerned that the public schools were teaching principles which conflicted with their family beliefs. Her mother taught them until Lynne was around thirteen years

of age, and then they started doing co-ops with different families. She shared with me how the co-ops worked.

Most of them [the teachers] were parents . . . some of them would have credentials for different things like English, writing, math, that type of stuff . . . sometimes there would be small groups, so maybe 10 to 15 families to up to 100 families. It varied depending on the place. Some of them were very school-like, where it was class times. You'd have an hour and thirty here, two hours here or sometimes only once a week, different curriculums and all this stuff. We were helping out at church at the time so it was traveling and doing all that.

When I asked her about the educational level of her parents she said that she thought her dad had received either a bachelor's or a master's from a Bible college and that her mother didn't have any college education, but that "she's got a lot of knowledge about just general stuff." Although the three sisters worked hard together on their lessons, helping each other, Lynne had a difficult time because of her dyslexia. According to Lynne,

The way my dyslexia is, I switch letters and numbers and I miss pieces of words and text. I don't even see it. I read, I read, I read, and my brain doesn't click that there's a word between. It took me a long time to get to the point where I am today. It took me until the age of 13 to actually properly write my own home address.

Because of the technicalities of home-schooling and also moving to North Carolina from Michigan, Lynne could not get a high school diploma, so she entered the GED program at our community college. She speaks very highly of the program. She recalls,

Oh my god, they're a godsend. I kid you not. I learned so easily with some of them for different aspects. We did practice tests. We had quizzes, homework. Honestly, I don't think they get enough credit because they brought in supplies and stuff, because they don't really get [paid] that much. They would bring worksheets, different things, extra textbooks for us to look at. . . They really went above and beyond for our classes.

She told me how supportive the teachers were, how they were always lifting the students up, and how the students supported each other as well. She talked about how the teachers took the time to sit down with the them one-on-one and help them study, and how they also did a lot of other fun stuff as well, like taking the students to social events that were happening on campus, and even job fairs. They even helped Lynne get her job at McDonald's.

Lynne did, however, have some challenges while she was in the program, especially with math. She recalls her frustrations,

For general reading, when I was in the middle section, I did really good. I was like, "Okay, I got reading," but when I would go into the higher class it was like, "I suck at math." I was like two points away from getting into that next [math] class and I'm like, "Okay, this is getting ridiculous. I'm getting so frustrated with all this stuff" . . . I was so stuck and I had been [stuck] there for six months. I was trying hard, I was doing everything, and they saw how hard I was trying.

The GED teachers ended up letting Lynne move up to the next level math class even though she was technically two points away from having the appropriate score. Allowing Lynne to move up and working with her one-on-one gave her the confidence she needed to eventually score high enough on the practice tests to sit for the actual math portion of the GED test. After a year and a half of going to classes every day, taking practice tests,

and attending study groups, while also working at McDonald's, she was able to earn her GED.

Because of her hard work and perfect attendance in the program, one of the GED teachers helped her get into the Horizons program for GED students. This program supports students as they go through the GED program. Because she was successful in the Horizons program, she was then recommended for a scholarship for the Visions program. The Visions program assisted her in the transition from the GED program into her first semester in curriculum classes at the collegiate level. Lynne shared that she would have been lost without the assistance of these programs. She stated, "They were very supportive. Doing the GED and actually getting influenced by the college. Honestly, until I moved here I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do—how to get this and go about doing that." I asked Lynne to tell me what her expectations were about college prior to attending and this is what she said,

I never really thought I was going to get into college, to be honest, because I grew up where people close to me, even though they were supporting me, would tell me, "You aren't going to own up to anything; you're not good enough," and all this stuff and it was really disheartening thinking that I'm never going to make it to do anything. It took a long period of me really accepting myself and really moving up and understanding myself both physically and mentally and educationally to get to where I am today, to feel as strongly as I do about what I want to do.

Lynne shared with me that her dreams are what inspire her to continue her educational endeavors. She knows exactly where she wants to be in the next twenty to thirty years, and she believes earning both an associate degree in graphic design and a bachelor's degree in business are two of the necessary steps to assist her in obtaining that goal.

The business curriculum was actually Lynne's first choice because of her desire to one day own her own business. However, on the day of registration she couldn't find the advisor she needed to register her for her business classes, and she was concerned about the number of remedial math classes she would be required to take. She then decided that graphic design might actually be a better first choice because of her love for art and design, and she also liked that the graphic design curriculum allowed a science in place of a math. Once in the curriculum, she felt completely at home.

Going into her second year of the program, Lynne became a member of the Student Government Association (SGA). Lynne started the AGD program a semester early, so going straight through for four consecutive semesters, including completing a 20 hour/week internship and taking a course in the summer, she started to get a little burned out, but SGA really kept her on her path. She recalled how the SGA opened many doors for her and motivated her to continue on with earning her degree. Lynne explained, "Really getting to know the SGA board and everybody there revamped my wanting to continue my education and getting it done. One of my love languages is serving others, and our job on the SGA board was to serve the college and the students." Making friends in the GED program, the GRD program, and the SGA gave her lots of supportive new friends who were all trying to persevere in their educational endeavors.

Towards the end of the interview I asked Lynne if there was one thing that she could change about her college experience what would that be. She replied,

What's to change? There isn't anything, because each trial and tribulation is necessary. Getting through college has really opened doors and made me see

things from different perspectives. That's what it's supposed to do. Education is supposed to challenge you and change you into what you need to be.

Honestly, even going through home schooling and the GED, each thing prepared me for different situations, like being dedicated during home schooling. There were points where my mom was working two, three jobs to just keep food on the table and everything for us kids. She really went above and beyond. She's my hero. It was doing that self-study that really pushed me into finishing the GED and then completing that, feeling accomplished, knowing that I can successfully do these things because of step one, to step two, to step three.

This perspective, her service to her college, and her hard work to achieve a 3.8 GPA, resulted in her being awarded not only an academic excellence award, but also one of the top two academic scholarship awards, the President's Scholarships. She was completely surprised, hardly hearing the presenter call her name, never thinking that she would be recognized in that way. She recalls,

Yeah, that was awesome. The funny thing is, when I was sitting there, I knew I was getting the award for academic excellence. I was like, "Yay, I got an award for awesomeness," and my mom came and saw me. It's just a lot of blood, sweat, and tears that had gotten me to that point where I'm doing so good, because growing up, I was used to getting C's. I was really bad at home schooling.

It was just so frustrating and hard for me, because it was a challenge for everybody around me to try to teach me because of my dyslexia and trying to understand how to teach me. I'm such a hands-on type of learner, and I need to see it and hear it with repetition, so when you don't have time or you're really busy, it's hard to teach me that way. That's why I really appreciated how it went in the graphic design program.

I wasn't even paying attention though when they announced the award. All I heard was the last part . . . President's Award and then my name. And I was like, "Wait, what?"

Lynne is now looking ahead to the next stage of her educational journey. She intends to transfer to a four-year institution in the fall, which will get her one step closer to her goal of one day owning her own business.

Wallace (Class of 2016)

Wally had a very difficult childhood and high school was the worst. He also had a lot of issues with his mother, and his Dad wasn't around while he was growing up. He shared,

There was a lot of things I was going through. I was very insecure, it was just more than one thing that made me feel that way. Feeling like I was secluded and I didn't really know how to respond to people so I wasn't much of a social person. I stayed to myself and that raises eyebrows in the high school. You know it's like, okay this person doesn't talk to anybody, let's pick on this person. Let's make them an outcast. That's kind of what I went through especially because of my size. I've always been a bigger person and in high school, it was a sin to be big. I was teased and bullied and picked on a lot, and it just got to the point where it started making me at one point feel like I wasn't worth being here. It got to a point where I started contemplating committing suicide. I was really going through the emotions.

Around the time he entered high school, he and his mom had a falling out, and she left and didn't get in touch with him for three years. During that time, he lived with his grandmother. The problem with that was that his grandmother worked all the time and was never home and Wally felt very alone. He shared,

Like I said, me and my mom had stopped talking for about three years. I had no contact with her whatsoever, and that killed me because she was like my best friend and we had a disagreement and she left, and I didn't hear from her. It's like my grandmother, because of her upbringing, she didn't know how to be a grandmother. She didn't really show affection. She wasn't an affectionate person. I'm a very affectionate person . . . That's just me. I've always been like that and my grandmother wasn't that type of person. It was very difficult for me to feel

like she cared. You know what I'm saying? I didn't feel like she loved me because she didn't give me the attention that I tried to give her . . . She was working all the time so she just wasn't there. It was kind of one of those things where as a kid you feel alone. I didn't feel like I had anybody to talk to. I didn't feel like anybody cared about me.

Wally got to the point where he really felt like he was about to lose his sanity, but he never talked to his grandmother about it. He never discussed leaving high school with her. She wasn't aware of what was going on, but eventually he just quit getting on the bus. He recalled,

I kind of fell off and that resulted in me failing high school my freshman year. I did attempt to go back, but my heart wasn't in it, and my head wasn't in it anymore either, so I was literally failing all of my classes. I was held back twice and that's when I went to Central High School . . . Me and my mom were corresponding again and I ended up moving back in with her and her girlfriend, but that didn't go well. I was still struggling with my own personal things. It was I want to say like an eight-month gap or something between my second year of being a freshman and the time I went back to Central. When I left, I did kind of take a break before I actually attempted to go back again. I think that break kind of detached me from a lot of things so when I went back it was like it didn't feel the same anymore. At that point, you know, I'm the oldest kid in my high school class, and it's like that depressed me all over again. I'm like, "I can't do it." I sat my mom down and I talked to her and I was just like, "I can't do it. I don't want to go back."

After multiple unsuccessful attempts in high school for several years, when his mom did come back into his life, Wally told her that he wanted to quit school. She agreed, but only if he promised her that he would get his GED.

Because Wally had such a tough time in high school, I wanted to hear about his interactions with his high school teachers. He shared with me the following.

I'm trying to think back to my high school. It's been so long and I feel so old every time I think about it. I don't know. In high school overall it just wasn't a good time for me. Of course, when you're a teacher you only get one side of the students. In the teacher's eyes I'm not trying or I don't want to be here. They're kind of like this kid, you know, they just kind of brush you off. No teacher had ever really taken the time out to say, "What's going on? What can we do to help?" That wasn't there in my high school. I never got that. Again, there's a lot of things that play into the reason I left but just thinking about it now, I didn't have not one teacher that ever showed concern enough to find out why I was speaking out or why I didn't . . . They just didn't care to my knowledge.

Wally never met his dad until he was 18. At that time, he made the decision to go live with his Dad in Fayetteville since he was feeling so lost and alone at home. When he went to live with his Dad he was really pushed by his Dad to let go of his mom and her side of the family. Things started off well for Wally while he was there. He got a job and began working on his GED, but when his mom started showing PTSD symptoms, his dad's family did not approve of Wally going back home to check on her. Wally said that he felt he had no choice but to go check on his mom, so he maxed out his newly acquired credit card to get back home. Because of his decision to go make sure his mom was ok, when he returned to his Dad's house, his Dad said he wasn't welcome there anymore. So he left and went back home. To this day, Wally no longer hears from his Dad, not even a text message.

But Wally stayed true to his promise to his mom, and after returning home and getting two months of GED preparation at the local community college, he received his GED. He was proud of that accomplishment, but then he kept hearing that the GED wasn't good for anything. He wondered if he did all that for nothing, and just what was going to come out of it. He was very confused as to his next step. At that point in his life,

he felt like he wasn't a school person. The idea of sitting down in a classroom and listening to a teacher lecturing did not appeal to him.

After he earned his GED he started the graphic design program because a friend of the family was in the graphic design program here, and she used to always bring her projects over to show them what she was doing. He reminisced,

That was like really neat for me. It was like I could see myself doing that. That's actually what inspired me to do graphic design. I was like, yeah. Then when I come here and meet y'all and the environment was just so much . . . I don't know. I love the teaching method that you guys have . . .

Wally didn't find the graphic design classes as easy as he thought they would be, but he encountered passionate teachers who were really concerned with his education and his well-being. He felt very much at home with the diverse students in the graphic design program. Wally supported himself while he was in school, which meant he had to work and go to school at the same time, which was very stressful for him. After completing his first year, because of the stresses of working different jobs trying to find employers that would work with his school schedule, trying to keep a roof over his head with bills and a car payment, and going to classes, it just got to be too much. He had to withdraw from a couple of his classes that fall semester and in the spring he ended up withdrawing from all of his classes. He took an entire semester off and then he returned part time. During that time off his mom asked him why he had stopped going to school, and he decided he needed to go back and finish. Wally said he wanted to finish not only for his mom, but for the teachers in the graphic design program, who he felt had been there for him and always encouraged him. He shared,

My lack of finishing high school was because I didn't have a support system and I did feel alone. That was a major key factor in why I didn't finish. Honestly, you guys are the reason why I'm still here. I have so much support from the whole team, and it's good to have that, because it keeps you grounded. It keeps you motivated to continue.

When I asked Wally what he remembered as being his most difficult challenges in college, he shared,

I would say it would have to be a combination of last semester and this semester as my most difficult time. Last semester being because it was the first time I was ever on academic probation and there was like this whole extra weight that was placed on me. It's like, "You can't fail a class. You can't do this." It was like, "Crap." I'm stressing out because, "Oh my God, I can't have an F. I can't have an F on this paper." I think that was one of my most stressful semesters because I had a lot riding on that semester. I know personally, financially-wise, I can't attend college without financial assistance. I can't. It was like, "Oh my God. My financial aid is riding on this. If I don't get [through] this semester, I'm not going to be able to do this anymore." That was really stressful for me and then again I was still working, and they're like, "We want all of your time" and class is like, "We want all of your time." It's like what to do? That was kind of the same for this semester as well but ultimately I chose to finish school. I don't regret the decision. I feel like I made the right decision this time.

Wally was placed on academic probation because he had withdrawn from those classes before coming back. Although it was a stressful time for him, he made it through that semester successfully. While we were discussing his successes, I asked him what was his most memorable experience in the graphic design program. He recalled,

I would say our portfolio show. Our show was very memorable for me. I remember the struggle it was. It was like the last day, me here trying to get everything mounted, it was crazy. Then again, it goes back to you. You were here on my last day helping me get my stuff put together. Not a lot of teachers are going to take that time. I'm pretty sure there could have been a million other things you could have been doing, but you were helping me get my stuff together. Sometimes that's all it takes, that little push.

I think having my family come in and view what I had been working so hard on and to see my mom and my grandma and their faces in that moment was priceless. My grandmother was crying because of one of the projects I did. She's always talked about owning her own restaurant. She used to. Now she doesn't cook as much, but she used to love to cook and we always told her, "You should open up a restaurant. You would kill it." The restaurant menus we made, I made for her, "Cheryl's Kitchen." When she saw that, it brought tears to her eyes and I was like, "Wow. I did that. I did that for her." Hopefully that inspires her a little bit to actually get out there and do it. Everything about that moment was just amazing for me. The little awards that you guys gave out at the end. It was just a really priceless moment for me that day.

When I asked Wally to define persistence he replied,

Persistence is the perfect definition of what has been going on with me for the last four years. There have been a lot of things that have tried to distract me from finishing this degree. I've been through three or four jobs since I started graphic design. I lost my first place, my apartment. My car's been repossessed, yet I'm still here.

Wally graduated from the graphic design program at the end of the summer semester of 2016, and is now planning on getting a Bachelor of Arts degree in Interdisciplinary Arts & Media at BU.

Summary

In this chapter I discussed the sampling techniques I used to select the 13 participants who participated in this study, and I painted a detailed picture of each person's background and educational experiences. During the interviews, I noticed many similarities and differences among the participants' stories as they described their experiences in both high school and college. To generate a substantive theory concerning persistence the similarities were analyzed and categorized. In the following chapter, I discuss the results from the study and explain the grounded theory coding process I used

to analyze the data. I discuss the four main categories which evolved from the data analysis and explain how I formulated the grounded theory.

CHAPTER V

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

In this chapter, I explain my findings as I proceeded through the data analysis process used in a constructivist grounded theory study. The steps outlined in a grounded theory study assist novice researchers by detailing procedures to follow when analyzing data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In addition, because I employed a *constructivist* grounded theory approach I was able to use “basic grounded theory outlines with twenty-first century methodological assumptions and approaches” (Charmaz, 2012, p. 9). I followed the procedures of Strauss and Corbin more so as a guide or tool than a dictate of rules or regulations. The main distinction between classic grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory, however, is not in the procedures for analyzing the data, as they are quite similar, but in the belief of how theories emerge from the data and who is responsible for the data analysis and the production of theory or theories.

Classic grounded theorists believe data emerges separate from the scientific observer while constructivist grounded theorists, such as Charmaz (2012), believe “we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We construct our grounded theories through past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices” (p. 10). Constructivist grounded theorists also believe the data analysis is to be co-constructed with the researcher and the participants

(Charmaz, 2012). Therefore, member checks were not only necessary, but an extremely important part of the research process.

In a grounded theory study, anything can be used as data. The key, however, is to start with the data. My data collection came from many sources. First and foremost, I used the formal interactions of the interviews and the transcriptions from those interviews. I also used my reflections after the interviews. I made use of jotted down notes from the informal interactions, like conversations. Student transcripts were also used to help jog a participant's memory, to check for accuracy of a recalled grade, or to help recall a time frame. After the interviews, when I needed more data on a particular topic, I texted the participants to ask for clarification and for their input. I also used content gained about a topic from the existing literature on persistence. The flexible methods of a grounded theory study allow researchers to both follow and adapt steps of the research process to conduct diverse studies (Charmaz, 2012).

During data analysis, I followed the procedures of Strauss and Corbin (1998), progressing through the stages of open, axial, and selective coding. During the open coding stage, I opened up or broke apart the data and identified and grouped concepts which allowed me to categorize the data. During axial coding, I put the data back together in new ways and made connections between a category and its subcategories, which helped me develop several main categories. The last step, selective coding, assisted me in integrating the categories and ultimately identifying and describing the central phenomenon or core category. I will now take the reader through my data analysis

process and show how the central phenomenon or core category—*a culture of persistence* emerged from the data.

Open Coding

According to Strauss and Corbin (1998) the first step in performing the data analysis is open coding. During this stage “concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered . . . data are broken into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for similarities and differences” (pp. 101–102). During open coding the first step is to develop concepts. Concepts are central and significant ideas found in the data. Three different approaches can be used to assist in the discovery of concepts in the data. These include (1) line-by-line coding, (2) searching for the main idea in each sentence or paragraph, or (3) asking of the entire interview what is happening and what is the same or different in this interview when compared with the other interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

I employed line-by-line coding for the first two interviews, but after coding the first two interviews in this manner, I did not feel I was gaining any more insight than when I searched for the main idea in each paragraph. After that I searched for the main ideas in each paragraph, and looked for the similarities and differences. When comparing interviews, to better understand what is happening, I asked questions such as who, what, where, why, and when. During open coding this moved the analysis from the descriptive to the theoretical (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I also noted possible *in vivo* codes, which are specialized terms used by the participant. “*In vivo* codes help us to preserve participants’ meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself” (Charmaz, 2012, p. 55). During

analysis, I also often wrote memos about the themes emerging from the data and reflected on how concepts were being combined into categories, which advanced my analytical thinking as I began to ask theoretical questions of the data. New interview data was constantly compared with previous interviews and modifications or additions were made to categories based on these comparisons. This step also helped me to better understand what was going on in the data. These different approaches to open coding allowed me to find the concepts which led to the development of the initial categories. I then began to identify and group concepts, looking for concepts which related to the purpose of this study, which was to better understand what conditions and experiences led to associate degree attainment for GED earners.

Concepts and categories are very similar, but a concept can usually be expressed by a word for which everyone has some similar idea of the meaning. For example, using the concept “classroom,” most everyone in the United States has a fairly similar idea of what a classroom is, but the idea of “classroom” brings on many different connotations. A classroom can be a place of learning or a place of fear, a welcoming place or a place of dictatorship, a place full of friends or a place full of strangers, possibly even enemies or bullies. A classroom can be a place where different ideas are welcomed, or a place of memorization and regurgitation. A classroom can be a place of activity, or a place where you sit still. A classroom can even be physically nonexistent as in the case of an online class, or in home-school, a classroom could be a bedroom or a living room. A classroom can be a place where you have fun, or a place of dread. The point is, regardless of how a

“classroom” or any concept is perceived, the most important aspect is looking at the concepts in the data from the participants’ viewpoint.

The participant portraits presented in Chapter IV revealed how high school classrooms were experienced by the participants. Allen and Rachel recall some not so great experiences, that they had in the high school classroom. Allen said, “High school was so regulated. You had to be here then there, five minutes between classes, you had to run all the way across school. You couldn’t even use the bathroom. Teacher can I use the bathroom? No, you’re going to abuse that.” Rachel also recalled a disheartening experience with one of her high school teachers that she vividly remembers. She shared, “So one of the old teachers, I’ll never forget it, Ms. Glenn, she was the English teacher. She was like, “Rachel, I think your socializing gets in the way of your schooling, or its more important than your schooling,” and I was like “Maybe it is,” and she was like, “You know people like you quit school all the time.” And I was like, “Well, maybe I should.”

As you can see from the participants’ quotes in Chapter IV and from these two instances as well, the classroom had many differing dimensions and was worth exploring deeper by elevating it to the level of category. Therefore, in addition to “classroom” being an important concept, classroom became a category, and later became “interacting in the classroom.” Once certain concepts were discovered, I elevated the concepts that most impacted the participants into categories and then explored which categories or concepts needed to be designated as subcategories. Each of these categories will be

explained fully in the next section, axial coding, which is the second step in performing the data analysis.

Axial Coding

Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe axial coding as the process of relating categories “a problem, an issue, an event, or a happening that is defined as being significant to respondents” to their subcategories which answer the questions about the phenomenon (p. 124). During axial coding the data gets reconfigured and connections are made between categories and its subcategories. Several main categories are developed and identified. In this study, the four main categories that emerged were: (a) interacting in the classroom, (b) participating in a multiplicity of support, (c) learning in a connected environment, and (d) experiencing freedom.

In this section, I discuss each of the main categories and the subcategories that were identified as most significant in this study. I use direct quotes from the participant interviews to begin to illuminate the emerging theory and make evident how I made meaning of the data. For ease of following the categories and subcategories throughout this chapter, I created a graphic organizer that visually shows each main category and the main category’s subcategories. I colored coded each category differently to indicate each time a different category is being discussed. See Table 1. After the discussion of the main categories and the subcategories, I explain selective coding and how that last step of the grounded theory coding paradigm process led to the identification of the core category or central phenomenon.

Table 1

Interacting in the Classroom with Subcategories

Category	Subcategories
INTERACTING IN THE CLASSROOM	Needing individualized attention
	Reacting to the conditions in the classroom
	Enjoying competition in the classroom
	Building relationships with teachers
	Connecting with peers

Interacting in the Classroom

Interacting in the classroom became a category because this concept fit into the overall path of the GED earners' educational journeys. For many of these participants, the number of students in a classroom, the overall atmosphere of the classroom environment, how competition was handled in the classroom, and the character of the teachers and the peers had a huge impact on their success. Most of the participants relayed in their interviews that classrooms in college in general and in the graphic design program in particular were vastly different from the classrooms they experienced in high school. The first subcategory of interacting in the classroom is needing individualized attention.

Needing individualized attention. For some participants, this was perceived as the size of the classroom, not so much the physical size of the classroom, but the size of the class in relationship to the number of students in a classroom. Having a smaller number of students in their college classes was recognized by some participants as

making a significant difference in their overall success, because it allowed for more individualized attention. Kevin recalls, “at KCC there were five of us that were in the program. That helped a lot.” Kevin went to two different community colleges and graduated from both. He also mentioned the classroom size at PCC, when I asked him what the major contributing factors were in the most successful periods of his college experience. PCC’s classes are not as small as KCC’s, but are still relatively small at approximately 15 to 20 students the first year, and 12 to 15 students the second year. In addition to several other factors he mentioned which he felt contributed to his success, he summed up with, “Small class size, and support from everybody.” Two other participants, Andy and Allen who chose to leave high school shared their experiences concerning class size. Andy stated,

I did better with smaller classes than I did with larger classes. When I felt like I was more involved in the class that was always a better thing. More dynamic teachers, teachers that were interested and passionate about their subject. It would definitely seep into me. I’d definitely absorb all that passion and become more passionate about it. I didn’t feel like I had a lot of grit back at that time. The same would be true now. I guess it’s true for most people, but somebody who’s really passionate about it, I want to absorb it and be passionate with them. So a small class with a teacher that wants to be there, that loves being there. That was my ideal situation, I think.

Allen shared as well, “I just needed attention. You know. In high school, you’re just 1 of 30 or 35. There was not a lot of attention going on.” Class size has a definite impact on the ability to give individualized assistance. Although the discussion was based on class size, the need for individualized assistance became the underlying concept in helping students want to persist in their studies.

Reacting to the conditions in the classroom. The second subcategory, reacting to the conditions in the classroom, takes into consideration the atmosphere of the classroom, including the environment, and the influences present in that space. The environmental conditions within a classroom can be very structured, or very free. The atmosphere can feel very formal, or informal. A classroom can be a place where you have fun, or a place of dread. A classroom can be a place of fear, or a welcoming place. Each participant had their own memories to share where the overall environment made a drastic difference in the way that they experienced the classroom. Joseph, who had been home-schooled prior to coming to PCC, shared the following about his first experience in a college classroom. He said,

It was the first time in a long time I had been in a classroom, even though it was kind of a different classroom. I guess it was kind of a mixture of the independence with a little bit of the school structure. Cause you know I was initially in the public school system, and then I was free to do whatever I wanted, and then in college, you have freedom, but then there is also, like a structure.

The classroom environments that the participants experienced varied greatly. Six of the participants had taken classes at other colleges either before or after attending PCC. In this section, I share some of those participant's experiences and recollections. Rachel shared her experience of the environment in her high school classroom and then, the environment of the community college classroom at the first college she attended. She shared how she personally reacted to the environment in her high school classroom.

I mean I would get in the classroom, and I would stick with a friend, or one person I knew well. And if I didn't know someone well, I would try to get with someone that I would be able to get to know well. And then I just wouldn't say

anything, depending on how the class dynamic went. If the class was kind of loud, then I would get loud, and I would joke with everybody else, but if it was a quiet dynamic, I would just be quiet and I wouldn't say anything.

Rachel's experience at the community college in the county where she grew up was better than high school, but still not ideal. Rachel recalls,

My English teacher wasn't very good at teaching, but I really enjoyed him because when I would go in, he would listen to me when I would talk. He was kind of serious. He didn't really joke a lot, but he did converse with me, and so it was always nice to go in there and talk to him. I guess, it felt like I was an equal. The rest of the teachers, you were not getting that at all, in the least bit. Most of the time it was very monotonous. They walk in, they give the lecture, and that's it. There's nothing else. It's Ms. So and So, or Mr. Blah. There was no first name basis. So it felt very formal, it felt kind of like high school, but I could come and go as I wanted.

Kat shared how she had a minimal number of caring teachers in high school and faculty members in college before coming to PCC. She stated,

PCC alone cares so much more about their students than BCC does. It blew my mind. And then you and Stacy. Ya'll care on a whole different level than my instructors at BCC ever cared. And that was such a different experience for me. I didn't even know professors were like that. I had some instructors like that in school, in high school, but I didn't realize college was like that. I mean I had one English teacher at BCC like that. My English 111 teacher was like that. I mean he took time to help me and stuff, but that was it. They didn't really care.

Both Rachel and Kat mentioned this same English teacher at BCC.

Camille was another participant who had experiences outside of the PCC environment. Camille left PCC after a year and transferred to another community college when she moved to Mississippi. She recalls the environment of the classroom in the graphic design program there.

Their classroom, it's broken up differently. Say you have a block schedule where you're in class from 8:00 to 10:00, 10:00 to 12:00, and 1:00 to 3:00, and it's all with him [the same teacher], but he's teaching different classes. They blend. It's hard not to share, I guess, yourself, with your students when you're with them all day long. You talk about what you had for dinner and what your wife said.

I think there is a positive and a negative, even though I might have found myself distracted throughout the whole course of the day, some students felt like they could extend one class into the next, so they had more time to work. I guess to work and develop whatever they were working on earlier instead of it being separate classes. They could keep on doing what they were into doing. That goes for the kids that just played on the internet and took smoke breaks. They just did that all day.

This type of environment was more of a distraction for Camille. DeAndre also found this kind of atmosphere distracting. He said, "When I had InDesign, I'm not talking bad about Mr. Smith, Smythe, whatever his name was, but I really didn't learn a lot in that class. I was like dude, I'm getting tired of hearing about your family. I didn't learn a lot in that class."

DeAndre discussed how teachers who made the classroom environment fun had a great impact on his learning. DeAndre stated, "I love the way GRD teachers teach. You all's classes are just fun and it's easy to learn that way, when you feel comfortable in the classes. You all make us feel right at home when we come in." The atmosphere of the classroom is a powerful factor, and ultimately sets the tone of the space. Students react accordingly to the environment or atmosphere in which they are immersed.

Enjoying competition in the classroom. The third subcategory of classroom, enjoying competition in the classroom, is typically seen as a rivalry between two entities for a desired object, usually resulting in a winner and a loser. However, friendly

competition can be healthy, and can also be used to create motivation. The majority of participants enjoyed the competitive atmosphere in the graphic design classroom.

Because the graphic design industry is indeed a competitive field, we would be doing a disservice to our students to not give them some type of experience in and preparation for this competitive mindset that exists in the field. Advertising agencies are known to be competitive with each other on a regular basis as they pitch ideas to prospective clients in hopes of being chosen for the job. Even within an ad agency or a graphic design firm, designers often compete with each other on projects. However, there are many different environments in which a graphic designer can find employment, and not all aspects of the profession are competitive. Leigh shared the experience of her internship while enrolled in the AGD program.

Yeah, so I got to see more of the creative side and do more design, which I thought was really interesting, but I just knew that wasn't for me. That kind of . . . I didn't like the competitiveness of it, which I'm just not that competitive. You know what I mean? It was all about who had the best design. It wasn't so much of a co-creative. It was more like everybody go do your own thing and then we are going to compare them to see [whose is the best].

I learned that wasn't the leg of the business where I would probably do well. For me, it just didn't feel like a good fit. They were actually really . . . They were really nice. They were very understanding. They were great. I could see why people love to go into that aspect of graphic design.

Following are a few stories of competition that were experienced in the classroom. Andy remembers himself and another student who were not competing in any particular contest, but just always seemed to find themselves competing with each other on their class assignments, which were portfolio based projects. He recalls, "I remember

butting heads with Vincent. That created a little stressful dynamic, but I think it was a little bit more on the friendly side.” I asked him if he meant on the competitive side, and he responded,

Yeah, on the competition side. There’s a little bit of rough edges there, but it was good. I’d be happy to see him on the street. I think I was such a slack, lazy person. I mentioned before lacking grit and so forth, but I was overall just really lazy. Vincent was the opposite. He was always punctual. He showed up on time. He always did all the assignments, he did all the work. He was the person that was putting in all the work, all the effort, and had all the motivation. I was consistently getting really good grades but with putting in minimal effort to achieve them and I think that really rubbed him the wrong way. It kind of made me his nemesis in a way. I had no ill feels or ill will towards him.

I also remember the competition for the Town of Bath logo. I remember being the only person selected out of my class as a finalist. There was, I think, five or so that were selected. All four were from the first-year class. No other person in my class got selected. Looking back on my design it wasn’t great, I wouldn’t have chosen it out of the five. It was cool to be selected though, as the only person out of the second-year class.

During the interview Andy and I were trying to remember all the details of the assignment. We were trying to remember if everyone went to Bath or just the finalists, and we were pretty sure everyone went because that would have been the purpose, to experience the town and then participate in the competition for the creation of the town logo. We both remembered the tour. I shared with him the name of the student that won the competition and he responded, “Was Tracy the guy? His had the boat . . . and the moonlight. His was awesome, his was a work of art.” I agreed.

Joseph recalled his experience of competing for and winning the design competition for the logo for the Chinese Society and how rewarding that experience was. He shared, “And then there was the Chinese Society logo contest, and I won that contest.

And they paid me like 90 bucks, it was supposed to be 50, but they liked it so much they paid me 90.”

In revisiting this idea of competition in the classroom, I went back to the participants and asked them how they felt the competitiveness of class assignments and/or client based class competitions affected their learning. Kat shared,

The competitiveness made me work harder and be the best that I could be. I believe that I chose to spend more time studying and learning because I needed more knowledge to be at the level of my classmates and to find a good job when I graduated.

DeAndre said,

I am very competitive and I love a challenge and competition. I also feed off of other people’s energy and ideas so the greatness of my peers drives me to learn more and try to be on the level of or better than them. This also makes me study harder and do more research in my field to be the best at what I do. In short I continue to learn more every day because of my peers and my experience in the classroom.

Jose stated,

Client based competitions were definitely more interesting because of the possibility of having my work used in the “real world.” The competitions pushed me into making better quality work and trying out new ideas and features in the software. Class assignments were just as important, but were more relaxed.

Allen shared,

Competitive class assignments certainly helped to keep me interested throughout my classes. I did find that some of the students that didn’t do as well would get discouraged, but it always made me push to do better. Client based projects, however, gave a little more of a push. As the kid that sat in math class saying,

“I’m never going to need this,” I certainly saw the relevance when there was a client at the other end.

Camille also shared how she liked to compete, and even joined an organization on campus in Mississippi that allowed her to do that, since she wasn’t given those opportunities in the classroom there. She was proud of the fact that one of the groups that she worked with won first place at state, and placed third at nationals, but she also shared that she couldn’t continue with the competitions because it was too expensive. She said,

I enjoyed the idea of competing against other schools. They competed against local colleges and universities. Take graphic design, for instance. You could do different projects. Let’s say you could do a print project. It [the competition assignment] would ask you to do [design] a newsletter, of course they are checking your layout and type. Then you would do an ad to go with it, a print ad for a magazine. Then they also have web development. You could do a website.

But it was a financial hardship, the traveling that they did. I didn’t have that kind of money. I didn’t know where I could leave my son, having relocated here, to [be able to] go with them [the club members]. I think one of them [the events] was around Spring Break. I think another was around Thanksgiving or something like that. I eventually withdrew, because I couldn’t travel.

They fundraised with us as well. That’s how they raised money to go to most of them. Either they sold cakes or chocolate . . . But you still had to pay out of pocket for your rooms and stuff. There are benefits, but the expense is really hard.

Many of the participants shared that they liked the competitive environment, but if these opportunities are not presented in the classroom, being able to participate may not be possible because of the cost. Many of the participants liked the challenges presented by the competitions and felt that the competitive environment motivated them to be the best that they could be.

Building relationships with teachers. Sometimes when people think of the concept of “classroom” they don’t actually think of the size of the space, or the number of students, or the environment or the atmosphere, but only of the teacher. The teacher in a classroom can mold the classroom to be a place where you interact with your teacher and classmates or a place where you sit still and are quiet. A classroom can be a place where different ideas are welcomed, or a place of memorization and regurgitation. During the interview Allen compared his teachers in high school to his teachers in college.

I mean seriously though, I hated teachers. No offense to you, but coming up through high school, it was a trial the whole way through. I hated teachers. Coming here was like a breath of fresh air, it really was. You and Stacy were awesome. You were understanding. You weren’t on top of me all the time. You let people do their thing. I mean outside of ya’ll, I mean they were basically just teachers, they were calm, on point. PCC was a pretty good school for me. I mean math is math. The science teacher he was awesome. He was fantastic, real dorky, but he was awesome, I loved him. And my English teachers, they were on point. I mean I love English. I love reading anyway. That was a good fit. I mean my teachers at PCC were awesome. I couldn’t believe it.

Zach also fondly remembered many of his college teachers at PCC. He stated,

I had really good relationships with a lot of my teachers in college. Because I don’t know, I guess you grow up more in college, and you are more mature. I had really good connections with the main ones, you, Stacy and Parker, but I also made strong connections with my art teacher and my marketing teacher. Those relationships with my teachers definitely influenced me a lot too, like making me evolve and grow. Like I learned a lot from like talking with my teachers and stuff and developing relationships and friendships with them too.

Rachel compared her teachers by making contrasts between the first college she attended and PCC. She shared,

I don't think the teachers at BCC were very engaging. You know, doing new things with students, or getting them hyped up, or getting them ready for the lesson at hand. I wasn't in a concentration, but I think that they could have done a little better. But at PCC, it was more engaging, we went on trips, we watched films, I don't know, there was just a lot of things that we did that were good learning tools, that I didn't get from BCC.

Wally shared his vastly different experiences with his teachers. In the interview, he told me about his GED teachers and his teachers in college. He had this to say about his GED teachers,

Honestly the vibe that I got from some of the teachers in my GED classes was I felt like . . . Some teachers you can kind of tell. They're here to get paid just like any other person. I think some of them had it in their mind, "These are high school dropouts. These are people who couldn't even cut it at high school." Despite how I may have felt, I still did what I had to do to get myself out of there. Yes, I think a major thing there was I felt like there wasn't really anyone that genuinely wanted to see us do better. They were just kind of like, "Okay, I'm here to teach you because this is what my job entails."

This is what Wally had to say about his college teachers,

I never got that from you though. I guess more so I feel like I can relate to you. Stacy was a work in progress when I first got here, meaning it took me a second to kind of figure out Stacy and kind of get comfortable with her teaching methods. With you I kind of felt like it just kind of fell into place. It's not just me trying to suck up to you or anything like that. I still remember our first day in graphic design class. You were so calm and cool when you came in there. You had us laughing literally ten minutes into the class. It's just like, "Yo. She's cool" and it made me more comfortable. In a sense it made me . . . Honestly, in my design classes was where I did the strongest. You made that possible because you made me feel comfortable in that class, and I didn't feel as nervous or scared to make a mistake because you didn't chew me out or you didn't look at me crazy when I came to you with an odd question. It was just like, "You're going to get it."

Stacy, she's a little bit more, I don't want to say strict, but she's . . . I don't know. I don't know how to word it. She's not a bad teacher at all. She's awesome. Around like I said the same with the photography teacher. It was a little bit more

intimidating. She was a little bit more intimidating to me. It was kind of more . . . I'm that person that if I'm nervous, like I said before, if I'm nervous or I feel like I may be prejudged, I tend to pull myself back and shelter myself a little bit. I've always been that person, you know how teachers always say, the first thing they say is, don't be scared to ask a question but at the end of the day 90% of your classroom has questions that will never get asked because of that fear of looking crazy . . . Even sometimes the teachers, while they're trained to try to remain neutral in that situation, your facial expression will still give it away, like, "Did you really come to me and ask me this question?"

As you can see from the experiences of the participants, teachers are in very powerful positions and the relationships between students and faculty made a big difference for these participants. Many of the participants felt they could not remain in their high school classrooms because of the teachers that they encountered.

Connecting with peers. The final subcategory of interacting in the classroom is connecting with peers. As previously mentioned, a classroom can be a place full of friends or a place full of strangers. Kat shared how she was scared to death entering college for the first time. She recalls, "I was 16 when I started at BCC, and I was scared out of my mind. I was in there with 18- to 19-year-olds, and that alone was nerve racking." The data in this study showed that the participants' peers had a great impact on how they experienced the classroom.

There were commonalities experienced among the students in the college classroom that created a connection. Some of the student peer relationships were more impactful than others. For Zach, making new friends with his classroom peers was actually his most memorable experience in college. He shared,

My most memorable experience was like the fun I had making new friends actually. Like meeting new people and learning and growing with them, like that

was my most memorable experience, like doing things outside of class, doing things in college. Learning new things in the classroom with your new friends and classmates.

He elaborated,

I came in very shy, kinda introverted. I mean, not knowing really what to expect. I remember that first day someone, some people invited me to go out somewhere, and going somewhere that first time, and having coffee and being nervous and scared and not knowing anyone in a town, and having to start making friends, and that probably would have never happened if I never came to college, and meeting people in the classroom too, talking to people you would never know and talking to people from different walks of life.

Rachel's peers were also a huge impact on her experience in the classroom. She recalls the connectedness that she experienced with them,

So then when I talked to you, and you told me about the program, and I kind of felt immediately that this was where I wanted to be. And then when I actually got into the class, it was interesting because everybody that was sitting around me, I think maybe had the same face. We were all like, "ahhhhh". You know, like this is amazing. Everybody had the same mindset. Everybody was excited, and had a yearning to learn whatever this was. And when we found out what it really was, we were all really excited. I say us, because it wasn't just me that was in there. It was me and 12-14 other people. There was a connectedness there, and I felt like well I have finally found what I am supposed to do. This is absolutely what I am supposed to do.

She elaborated,

All of these people [peers] were very pivotal in helping to fashion something. Because when you first get here as a first year student, you don't know what to expect, but the people who were a year ahead of me, like Hannah, Warren, and Jim, all of them said, this is what you can look forward to, this is what you can expect. And because they helped me know what was going to happen, it made the transition a lot easier.

Andy compared his experience with his peers at PCC and CU:

I think the support was not the same because I felt a real connection with the classmates [at PCC]. I, definitely, because we're rotating through pretty much all the same classes together, there's a lot of getting to know your classmates which I really enjoyed. Plus the relationship I had, a good relationship, I already knew the class ahead of me. When I'd see them around, I felt like I had a great relationship with them and actually I'm still Facebook friends with some people that were in the class ahead of me.

Some participants were not quite as passionate, or as impacted by their peers, but don't really recall any bad experiences either. Jose shared his challenges with not being extremely fluent with the English language.

Yeah, I think it was, yeah, I mean I never felt like I didn't fit in. I mean maybe one, being from a different country, being very fresh with having to speak English all day long with everything. I mean that was a little, I mean something that stopped me a little bit, but that was more on my end than on my classmates. I don't remember them pushing me aside, or not including me, or making fun or whatever. I think it was, I think it was a good fit.

Kat remembers having a closer connection with the peers that she shared common interests with. She shared,

Depending on the age groups. Here it was good. The first semester was the hardest. Getting to know everybody. Learning where you fit in. Learning what you could say. Who you could trust. I mean I connected more so with people who were my age, or I had common interests with, like some of the students I became friends with, we were all gamers.

Leigh was a bit more of a loner, but became closer with her peers the longer she was in the program. She shared,

I had good interactions with my classmates. Like I said, I didn't have many. Mostly, I think, starting off, I kept to myself a lot. I branched out a little bit as I kept going and got to know people better, but I didn't have any issues with anyone. No fights, no conflict resolution needed, nothing. There's some people I would get annoyed by at times but that's just when you're high stressed towards the end and trying to get your portfolio done. It's very easy to flip out, yes. I felt like most people when you did, I felt people got over it quickly. Nobody held that against you. Everybody had their moment where they're like [softly screams] You just roll with it. I didn't have . . . I didn't have any issues with the faculty or my classmates really. I thought it was a very good social environment.

It was a lot easier for me the last two semesters [the second year of the program]. I enjoyed the last two semesters the most of my time. I think it was because I was going fulltime. I probably had over eighteen credit hours. That was a lot. Plus I was working there [as a lab tech]. I think socially, I was very shy. I was kind of over that shyness.

As you can see from the experiences of the participants, the friendships that the students made with their peers had a huge impact on the connectedness they felt in the program. For one of the participants, the friendships that he made, and being able to learn with his friends, was actually his most memorable college experience.

Participating in a Multiplicity of Support

I will now explain how the second main category, participating in a multiplicity of support, came to be. Initially, I struggled with which concepts would be elevated to categories, and which categories would become the main categories because there was so many of them. When I simply mulled over all the categories it was a bit overwhelming, and I wondered how I would ever know which categories were most important and how all of the data would form a grounded theory. However, as I repeatedly read back over the data that I used to establish the subcategories of the first main category, interacting in the classroom, I noticed that the concept of support was very prevalent. When I looked at

the data more closely, I recognized that there were many subcategories of support as well, and I had that aha moment—that sudden realization and comprehension of not only exactly how the grounded theory process works, but that it was indeed working. I didn’t have to figure out which categories were most important. The data was actually telling me. The data elevated support to another main category which ultimately became participating in a multiplicity of support.

Table 2

Participating in a Multiplicity of Support with Subcategories

Category	Subcategories
PARTICIPATING IN A MULTIPLICITY OF SUPPORT	Receiving and giving peer support
	Experiencing teacher support
	Having financial and other forms of support
	Creating a “friend-family”

Once I knew I was looking for other instances or happenings of support in the data, I went back to my original data charts and looked again at the data that I had initially charted during open coding when I was developing and grouping concepts and categorizing the data. I had previously organized the data from the participants on large charts, which allowed descriptive data from each of the participants to be organized by topics in a standard format. Once I did this I was confident participating in a multiplicity of support was worthy of becoming a main category. I also found that creating a “friend-family” needed to be added as a subcategory, when I noticed an interesting way that the participants were both interpreting and defining family.

The category of support was discussed in the interviews in a myriad of ways and ranged from many different types of support to a complete lack of support. A lack of teacher support was most often experienced in high school. Allen mentioned that he just needed more attention, and Wally said that he did not have one single teacher in his high school who ever showed enough concern to even ask him what he might be going through, instead preferring to one dimensionally judge him and make assumptions. During this time period in his life, he was also lacking family support. He mentioned that this total lack of support was one of the many factors that contributed to his desire to leave high school. Wally also felt a lack of support in his GED classes. The feeling he got from the GED teachers was that they were just there to get a paycheck and that they couldn't have cared less whether he succeeded or not. However, at this stage in his life, he had regained family support, and he didn't let the attitude of the teachers deter him from earning his GED.

There were many instances of support that weaved throughout the previous category, interacting in the classroom. For Rachel peer support was used as a way of coping with the high school environment. She shared that she would stick with a friend or try to get with someone that she felt she would be able to connect with. In college, her experience was quite different as she experienced the support of her fellow classmates, and also support from the class ahead of her. This support helped her transition into and through the program, because she knew what to expect at each stage of the curriculum. Some of the participants felt that they were being supported in the sense that they felt their teachers cared about their well-being, while other participants experienced support

through understanding teachers. For many of the participants building friendships with their peers had a huge impact on their college experience. There were also instances of support that happened outside the classroom during co-curricular activities like internships, support programs and in the computer labs. There were also supportive friendships that were made with students in other programs on campus.

I asked Rachel during our interview who her support person was during her college experience. Her answer helps sum up and explain the multiple ways a student can experience support. She responded,

Do I have to pick just one? There was never just one person. It was literally everybody in my life. So, it was my mom and dad. It was Katie. It was you. It was Hannah. It was Warren. It was Jim. All of these people were very pivotal in helping to fashion something. Because when you first get here as a first-year student, you don't know what to expect, but the people who were a year ahead of me, like Hannah, Warren, and Jim, all of them said, this is what you can look forward to, this is what you can do. And because they helped me know what was going to happen, it made the transition a lot easier. And then I had emotional support, with Katie saying, oh, you're doing such a good job, that's so great, and Mom and Dad are like I'm really proud of you. And then you were there. I always felt a great sense of support from you. So, it just took the worry out.

Receiving and giving peer support. In this study, the support of peers was very prevalent. Peer support was a subcategory that prior to doing the interviews, I had not previously realized had the impact on the participants at the level that it clearly did. This was a type of support that I did not always witness as their instructor, because it happened outside the classroom. Camille shared,

You guys are great [teachers], but also there was this thing that went on in the lab. We all had our own things going on, but people would stop and be willing to say, "Yeah, that works," or, "No. That doesn't work. Flip this. Move this" You're

giving it your best and you have the support of people that are trying to achieve the same goal.

Andy, Kat, and Lynne shared how studying with friends or taking their general education classes with friends made a world of difference in their success. Andy stated,

For anything that didn't come easy or I struggled more, I found that anytime that I had a group, a peer group, especially a study group made all the difference. I struggled a little bit more with the art history classes when I got over to CU, and the first one I think I made a B. We had a dedicated study group for finals that we all got together, and we kept studying, and it made it more fun to be there with other people and that interaction.

Then I took the second art history the second semester and I believe I flunked. I'm not even sure. I didn't have a study group, and I didn't have that personal resolve to really make it happen on a daily schedule.

Kat shared,

Psychology was hard. It helped because I had Rita with me. I mean we tried taking classes together. I mean that helps. It helps. It really does. Because going in a class by yourself, especially like a science class, or a history class, and if you're doing a night class or something, and you're in there by yourself with a whole group of people you don't know. It's going to be hard.

Kevin also mentioned the support of peers.

You know, I felt like we were supporting each other a lot of the time. Whether or not anyone else felt like that or not, I don't know. I felt like we had each other's back if we needed something, or for critique, or whatever, I felt like we were there for each other.

Lynne shared several different instances of peer support in her interview. The types of peer support ranged from collaborative group support through critiques and discussions,

to support from the Lab Techs who are recent graduates of the program, to individual classmates helping with very specific assignment challenges.

I liked the fact that we could challenge each other and be like, “Okay, we see this, you see that. What are you doing there? Why in the world did you do this?” And be real, you know? Also, being there and being understanding, and being like, “Let me help you real quick. You’re getting frustrated. I can fix this. Let’s feed each other.” It happened during my first semester with Photoshop, I was so done with one of the first projects because I didn’t understand it. It was something about a shadow. I remember the lab techs helping me and other classmates, going through that process. Then honestly, the last semester Misty was majorly there. If I didn’t have her, I probably wouldn’t have finished my coffee bags. It was that bad. I was like I hate my stupid logo.

During the interview Lynne also told me how she met and made friends with a girl that wasn’t in the graphic design program. This girl was always outside in the hallway waiting for classes to transition. Lynne would be leaving her English class and the girl was coming into the same classroom for her next class. Each day they would see each other and they ended up having conversation after conversation.

Lynne recalled,

I met my best friend outside in the hall of my classes for English and Intro to Communications, and she ended up helping me with English because she loves writing and reading and stuff. She ended up becoming a friend tutor, spending the night and helping me with stuff.

Peer support was experienced in many forms. Many participants found peer support simply through the friendships they made with their classmates. Some participants became friends with the students in the class ahead of them and learned from the experiences of the students that had gone before them. A couple of the participants

made use of peer study groups or took the general education classes they found more challenging with friends. Some participants found support outside the classroom in the computer labs with both their fellow graphic design students and the lab techs who are graduates of the program.

Experiencing teacher support. Students perceive the support of teachers in many ways. Sometimes teacher support is simply perceived as the little things. For Jose, it was letting him know what classes he needed to take and just knowing what to do and when to do it, and guiding him in that process. Sometimes students may just need teachers to respond to their questions and be understanding about the things that are happening in their lives outside the classroom. Lynne worked while she was in school and could not meet the Sunday midnight deadlines of her online class. She just needed to be able to submit those assignments on Monday since she worked late and didn't get home until one or two in the morning. She recalls her experience in the program concerning her first on-line class:

I love, love, love, love everybody in the graphic design program. I'm sorry. I would not be where I am if I didn't have each teacher in each class and different things. I remember my first semester with Stephanie online. She was so helpful because I'd be like, "Hey, I got this problem. Where are you?" And she'd be like, maybe thirty minutes later, "Okay, do this, this, this, this, and this." I'd be like, "Okay." She was very understanding because I was still working at McDonald's at the time, so I was not getting home until like one or two o'clock in the morning.

Leigh shared a very different experience with an online instructor in the Web Technologies program. She felt her teacher couldn't have cared less whether she stayed in the program or not. She replied,

I had issues with him like . . . If I ever had a question or anything, it took forever for him to return my email or anything. It was a pain in the neck. I was really frustrated with that. Whenever you do an online class, a lot of it is still on you as a student, but I felt like I was having to push a lot for him to actually be interested in the student's position. I don't think he would have cared if I had just dropped out but that's neither here or there.

Sometimes students need a little more support, more than advising, more than having flexible deadlines, more than responding to emails. Sometimes students need teachers to pay more attention to them and be encouraging. Rachel believes that having teacher support in high school would have made a big difference in her overall confidence level. She shared with me,

I think words of encouragement would have been better for me, because I needed for someone to say, you are good. You're not a bad student. And I wasn't a bad student. I just think I needed help in areas that I wasn't good at. And I think if anybody had actually paid attention, they would have seen that.

Sometimes students need a teacher to silence the negative thoughts in their heads about themselves and their ability. This was evidenced in Rachel's previous comments and also in both Camille's and Kat's experience at PCC. Camille shared,

You and Stacy were really instrumental with me staying in that program that first semester, because I had so much going on personally that I would look at the work that the other kids were producing and I'm older and I'm saying to myself, "God, does her dad pay for her car? Does she worry about insurance?" I'm trying to figure out grown-up issues. I was like, "I can't do this," but you guys insisted that I could. I was like, "Okay, maybe. Maybe they paid them to say that," but I knew that wasn't the case, because of the hours that you guys put in. Staying in labs late. Coming in early. Having it open on weekends. Even Stacy that was willing, or even Charity, that would stay and talk to you. The class is gone. The school is empty. Stacy would take me back to her office and show me some books to give me inspiration. That type of stuff. That was what helped me get through. That was the inspiration. It really didn't come from family. I can't even say it

came so much from myself or my classmates, but it was you guys that made the difference and helped me stick with it.

Sometimes a student's insecurities go unrecognized. I was surprised by Kat's answer when I asked her if she felt that she fit into her chosen program of study, because if asked, I would have said she was a very confident student. She explains,

Honestly, I know I'm good at . . . in reality, I know I'm good at what I do, but my problem is I don't have enough confidence in myself, so I never believe in myself enough, when I look at my work. I always think it could be better, and when I look at my classmates work, I always think their work is better than mine. So that's a fault of mine. So, in that aspect I didn't feel like I fit in. At BCC, I never felt like I fit in there at all. I always felt that I was out of place there, but I thought it was an age thing, because I was so much younger. Because believe it or not, back then I was really shy. I didn't talk at all and I didn't know how to approach people. I mean the older I got the more I realized well I am who I am, and people can either like me, or they don't have to be my friend. The world is the way it is, and that's just how the world is going to be. But back then, at 16, you kind of want the world to accept you. . . Yes. One of my biggest things, I don't believe in myself enough and I constantly doubt myself.

Sometimes teacher support is perceived as lending a helping hand. Wally described it as, "that little push" and Kevin referred to it as that "constant push." Kevin stated, "Not letting stuff slide. Like, that constant push. I mean, you, really, I'm not trying to kiss your ass or anything, but really that constant push, I mean the details. Now I realize how important all those little details are. I really appreciate that." Wally mentioned that support from the whole teaching team kept him grounded in his studies. Both Camille in her previous statement, and Wally recalled how extra assistance kept them motivated to continue their studies.

Later in the interviews I started asking if the participants felt that their teachers cared about their well-being. Leigh shared,

Yes, I do. I felt like everybody was vested in how the students did, whether it was anything at home that was causing issues with people showing up or getting work done on time. I felt like everybody . . . I felt like when someone didn't show up or didn't get a project done that the teachers did try to get to the root of it. It wasn't, just oh, your project is not here. Here's your not grade for that. What the hell? I felt like there was a lot of understanding. Well, they cared whether or not you made it through the program. That made a big difference too.

Wally shared,

Plus, I've already explained how you and Stacy, you both have changed my life in a lot of ways because I remember having to come to you or Stacy and be like, "I'm going through this." My work is slacking because I've got this going on at home and this going on. Both of you could have easily said, "Wally, I can't do anything for you" and go on about your business. For both of you to be like, "What can we do to help? If we get this done and you get this done then we can work on this and that." It was just like, "Wow." That's a rarity in people in general. It's just like they feel like if it's not my problem, I don't have to deal with it. But you both kind of took my problems and made them your problems. You helped me find solutions. I think that is half the reason why I'm still here and why I'm sticking it out. I feel like not only do I have the obligation to my mom but I feel like I have an obligation to both of y'all.

I've heard stories about teachers who try to scare their students away, and always wondered why a teacher would use such an approach. The following two experiences from Andy and DeAndre give some explanation into this mindset, yet both of these students chose to stay in the class. Andy stated,

I remember taking the Drawing class at Carolina University and the teacher that was teaching the Drawing class, she was the head of the foundations for CU. She was apparently known as being one of the toughest, stricter teachers. I remember on the first day she said something along the lines of "If you want to have a nice

vehicle, if you want to have a nice house, if you want to have a comfortable life you need to get out of here right now, you're in the wrong place. There's never going to be any money, you're always going to be poor. Life is going to be a struggle. If you're interested in having a nice vehicle at some point in time you need to get out.

She really pushed hard the first few weeks to make students quit. The idea was to kick people out. They actually would assign more people to the class than the class could hold. There's only so many easels and there's 6 or 7 more students than there are easels in the class. The class couldn't hold that many people, and she knew that people would quit so she'd push you really hard in the beginning to get you to drop the class so that if you didn't drop the class you're there for learning, you're there to stick around.

DeAndre shared a similar experience at PCC, where a teacher pushed students to leave.

Yeah, I think I took English 111 in summer. That teacher, now he kind of scared me when we first got there. He talked tough when we first got there. He's like, "Half of you are not going to make it. I'm going to tell you right now." He's just going in on everybody in there. It's like, "This is the first day dude, what are you doing?"

He jumped down our throat, but he's one of the best English teachers I had. I understand why he did . . . Why he came at us the way he did. The first two days, he went and jumped down everybody's throat and let everybody know he wasn't playing around and whatever. He don't care, you come here, or you don't come here. Some of the people quit, they dropped the class. We found out later, he's not really like that, he really cares. His teaching style was real cool. I learned a lot from his teaching style. Yeah, he was just an all-around great teacher.

He hit the nail on the head. He said, the reason why he did what he did the first day. He wanted to get the people that was in there messing around out the way, so they wouldn't distract everybody else. He said, some people are here to actually do work. Some people are here just to get their school money. Once that money comes, you're going to see. He kept saying once the money comes out, you'll see who will be here or whatever. A lot of people do that. I can't wait till they pass those checks out, so we will see who will be here and who won't.

These types of tactics definitely do not encourage students to stay.

In later interviews to gain a better understanding of why students stay, I began to ask the participants what types of practices the participants believe create an environment that encourages persistence. Leigh shared that she felt understanding teachers encourage persistence. She shared an experience that she had in her ACA 111 College Student Success course that could have been much worse for her had the teacher not been understanding. She explained how the class only met once a week and that she went to every class and did every assignment, except for one time when she was sick. On the day of Leigh's one absence, however, the teacher got so frustrated with the number of students that were cutting her class, that she decided to create an assignment that was due the next class period and was going to count for a substantial amount of their final grade. When Leigh returned to class the next week she found out about the assignment and that she would be receiving a zero, since she did not have the assignment. She explains,

I would say having someone who is understanding when something goes wrong like with ACA 111. She understood and she gave me a little bit of flexibility with my grade. She looked back at my attendance and realized that I wasn't a flake. amenable Someone took the time to look through it. That didn't knock me off my path but it might knock somebody else off. Did that make any sense? Having one person, you're already in a bad place, in a bad position push you down a little further, do something unfair or even if it is fair, whatever they're doing, like not giving you just a little bit of slack. Sometimes you just need to be given a little bit of a break and if people understood and had a little bit of compassion for your situation or took the time to . . . I think that would go a long way. To me, that would be the biggest thing is just to . . . Sometimes it just takes one negative moment to really just knock someone off their path. All right, that's it. I'm done. The straw that breaks the camel's back, that kind of thing.

Wally's understanding of the impact of teacher support is a good summation to the subcategory, experiencing teacher support.

The teachers that actually take the time out to understand their students, that don't just look at teaching as a job but as something that they really want to do. I think that's when you get the best results from your students is when you . . . That's one thing in the world. Everybody's supposed to be heard. Everybody wants their voice or their opinion to matter. The people who are in that position to make a difference and actually listen is what makes everything run smoothly.

Having financial and other forms of support. There were many “other” types of support that were seen by the participants as major contributing factors in their success, including but not limited to financial support, spiritual support, extracurricular support, and support programs. Financial support was a major contributor in giving the students the material means to attend college. Nine of the 13 participants received financial support through Pell grants. Without this financial support, the majority of the participants would not have been able to attend college. Jose explained how receiving a Pell grant was very important to him:

That was big. Not having to worry about money all that much, gives you more time to work on school work. I really think that was the biggest one. At some point, I still had a job, a part time job, but again, it wasn't if I don't go to work, I can't afford school. So, you know that, and just thinking about the future. You know, what am I going to do with it. I don't have to worry about getting a job. I don't have to go back in construction.

In addition, the idea of the financial reward of a career at the end of the two-year commitment to school was also a motivating factor for degree completion. Kevin shared,

I was working at a tree farm and it was just too damn hot. I mean really, I just decided it was time to go back to school. I knew I [had been] able to get my GED. My mom didn't make that much money. I was living with her . . . Yeah, I mean, I was in and out of the house. I'd get a job and move out, then lose my job, then have to move back in with my mom. I was always pushed to go back to school to get some solid employment.

Not having the financial means to attend college can definitely be a deterrent to persistence. Wally had to take a semester off here and there to get caught up on his bills before returning to focus on the completion of his education. Kat had to take a brief hiatus from completing her four-year degree because she owed money to CU and could not return until her debt was paid in full. However, thanks to her fulltime employment as a graphic designer, in December she will have her debt repaid, and intends to return to school and complete her bachelor's degree. Rachel mentioned in her interview her concern and continuous worry that if she does not receive enough money from both the Pell grant and loans that she will not be able to continue and complete her bachelor's degree at the university she currently attends.

Camille faced many financial challenges that stem from being a student and a single mom, and for the most part she had to do it all on her own without the help of friends and family. During her last semester at the community college in Mississippi, because of a lack of material support, she ended up homeless, and had to move into a motel. She explained how it was very stressful, but the fact that she was almost finished is what got her through. She shared, "I wasn't going to give up. I was too close, so that's why I did it."

Amazed at her resiliency, I asked her who her support person was during her college experience. She jokingly said, "Support person? What is that? I didn't get that from the bookstore." I then asked her how she coped, not having a support person. She responded,

It was God. It was God. I remember one night when I was leaving art class. I took the 6:00 to 9:00 or 6:00 to 10:00. I was standing outside. The campus was almost empty. I was waiting on a ride. I was like, "I can't do this." They asked me to draw a pumpkin. I was like, "Oh man." I'm looking up at the moon and tears are streaming. They want me to draw a pumpkin with a pencil and a sketchbook. I was like, "I can't do it. I can't do it." I heard this voice and it was like, "Yes, you can. You can do all things." That's what I used to say when it got hard. I would cry and cry. You don't know what it's like to have so many things going on in your head. You look over at the computer next you. The person is doodling away and it's beautiful. I'm like, "I can't do this." It's hard to dream when you're grounded in reality. It's hard to create if you can't dream. You need the freeness of spirit, I think, to see things that don't exist and make it exist.

When I asked Lynne what were the major contributing factors to her success she replied, "having a really good support system." Lynne had several different support systems that she was able to utilize throughout her time in both the GED program and the AGD program. In addition to family and friends supporting her along the way, she also had the college's Horizons and Visions programs and the SGA. The different programs that she was in really helped her transition through and out of the GED program and into the AGD curriculum.

The support she received while in the GED program was part of the Horizons program. Horizons helped her find a job and even provided her with gas money. They helped her get the Pell grants and loans she needed to attend college. They also recommended her for the Visions program once she was ready to enter a curriculum program. Once she entered a curriculum program, Visions assisted her with registering for classes, and getting her set up with tutors when she needed them. However, after taking a year to get through the classes she needed to pass the GED tests, and then

completing her first year in the graphic design program, plus a 200-hour internship during the summer semester, Lynne started to get a little burned out.

I believe part of this burning out, or possibly her feeling a little insecure about moving forward in the program was due to what happened at the end of her internship when she received the evaluation of her internship performance. Lynne's internship coordinator gave her a grade of B- and for Lynne this was the lowest grade she had ever received in her college career. The coordinator actually had good things to say about Lynne stating that she, "went above and beyond to be here early for her shifts each day, she put in over her 20 hours per week and was willing to stay over to complete tasks, and that she was always positive and enthusiastic to learn new skills." However, the one negative comment is what Lynne remembers the most. The coordinator said that she felt Lynne "lacked initiative and confidence when presented with independent work challenges. She seemed to pick up on skills and workflows easily when trained. However, she did not implement these when given job tickets. Multiple times she asked her trainers before reading the orders to evaluate what needed to be done." In Lynne's mind she considered this an unsupportive experience.

In discussing this experience during the interview, almost a full year after the internship experience, Lynne's takeaway was that her coordinator thought she was "incompetent" and Lynne took that to heart. She didn't consider the experience supportive. Lynne explained,

That was my biggest pet peeve, them saying I was incompetent when you, in the first two weeks, said, "You need to come to us before and after a job to make sure

you know what you're doing." [whispering] I'm not that incompetent. Yes, I have questions and I like knowing how to do it, but I'm learning. It's very new.

At the same time, however, she did feel the internship enhanced her learning. She told me that she really didn't know there was a problem until the end when she received her evaluation. Lynne also shared that she did actually learn a lot from her internship, especially concerning the printing side of graphic design, like specific tips and tricks to save ink and paper, and how to be more proficient. Her favorite part of the internship was learning how to set up files to be printed on the Scodix printer. She was able to have her three book covers that she designed in class printed professionally on the Scodix printer as a parting gift from her internship experience.

After returning in the fall for her second year of the program, she applied to join the SGA as their Public Information Officer. She shared how that commitment refreshed her desire to finish.

Really getting to know the SGA board and everybody there, and doing that, revamped my wanting to continue my education and getting it done. One of my love languages is serving others, and our job on the SGA board was to serve the college and the students. We do stuff for the students. It really revamped my wanting to continue and finish my education.

The next example of "other support" highlights how competition isn't always seen as simply a positive for the winner or a negative for the loser. Participation itself creates lots of winners by providing learning experiences. At a different point in the interview with Andy, he mentioned Vincent again, and the way he and his classmate competed with one another. He recalled, "That dynamic when we were going from class

to class together where he was usually one of my biggest critics in all the classes and always wanted to point out the shortcomings of my work. I think that was beneficial though to have that.”

Competition in a supportive environment can be motivational and rewarding. Leigh had only great things to say about her internship experience with a local advertising agency, yet at the same time, it was the very competitive work environment that she did not care for. She learned that she did not want to work in such a competitive atmosphere and that she preferred a collaborative work environment instead. At the same time, she shared how supportive the people at the agency were. “I guess for me as a new student and just starting up, I felt very . . . Not that it was their fault, I felt very insecure about what I was doing. That might have something to do with it but I would say overall that they were great and I learned a lot.”

Other participants shared their experiences with internships and how they felt that their learning was supported through these experiences. DeAndre shared that he participated in an internship at All Over Media and thought that it was a cool experience. He said, “I met a lot of people and learned about real world problem solving. I also taught them a few things as well, so it was cool.” And Kat shared both the good and the bad concerning her internship and how it benefited her learning.

While at PCC, I did do an internship. During that time, I got published as an author in a magazine, took photographs and worked on various design projects. The company had their hands in a lot of different markets. That was both good and bad. They had no straight direction and didn’t really have the time for two interns that needed guidance. With that being said, I got a lot of experience with difficult clients and learned how to adapt to new situations. Silver lining, right?

Support programs, financial support, spiritual support, and extracurricular support were varied types of additional support that were perceived as being beneficial to many of the participants. However, all of these forms of support were not experienced by every one of the participants, and just because these types of support are provided does not necessarily mean that the student will be successful in their educational endeavors.

Creating a “friend-family.” As previously mentioned, I noticed an interesting way that the participants were interpreting and defining family. In addition to the traditional interpretation of the word family, many of the participants defined family as the connectedness of the teachers and students and the relationships that they experienced in the AGD department, using language such as “friend family,” “like a family,” “GRD family” and “feeling at home.” For these participants, family support did not just include immediate family members. Zach said because he moved away to go to college and his family was far away, that he created a “friend-family” while pursuing his graphic design degree. This idea of the students and teachers in the graphic design program as family was such a pervasive thread throughout all of the interviews I decided it was appropriate to use an in vivo code to describe this subcategory.

The word, family, has multiple meanings to many different people. Family can be a parent, or a sibling, a grandparent, an aunt or an uncle, a spouse, a partner, or even a family friend, or someone like DeAndre. DeAndre was much older than his classmates and was perceived by them as a big brother figure, who actually filled in as a family member for classmates in the absence of their own family being there for them. DeAndre shared his experience helping his classmates who did not have family support.

Yeah we're going to support each other. Just like Chyna. She didn't . . . Her family didn't support her. Tray, you know, he had family issues. We all worked it out together. I was late a couple times, because I would have to go pick somebody else up to make sure they got to school. So now, I'm late messing around with them. I just wanted to make sure they graduated with me. That was all that mattered, even if I got in trouble trying to help them. I hope my teachers understood. You got to have support from everybody. Whether you want it, or not, you're going to get it when you get here.

I asked Chyna if I could share her public Facebook posting because even though she was not a participant in this study, her comment backs up what DeAndre said about family.

She posted this the day after the opening reception of the students' portfolio show:

Last night I started to say F it 'cause none of my fam was coming but my girl and li'l brother. But I realized that the whole two years the only family I've been having is my classmates. It's been rough for me this year but y'all guys never let me give up and Eleanor Willard, Stacy Jarrell, and Stephanie Whitlock-Dicken stayed on me 'til I got it together. I love you guys and I'm going to really miss you all! Now I'm being a water baby.

The fact is, some students have family support, and some do not. Camille was one participant who did not. She tried to lean on her brother when she was at PCC, but that didn't work out because he was so busy with football. A lack of family and sibling support is one of the reasons she decided to move to Mississippi, where one of her childhood friends lived. Camille hoped that she would find more support there. Once she graduated from the community college in Mississippi, I asked her about her future plans, and she responded:

I finished school. I graduated, but I've been looking for a job. I've mostly been freelancing up until this time. I really don't have the money to get home. My family is living their own life, so I figured I would . . . I don't know. I'm taking it day by day really.

In contrast, you can see from the experiences of other participants how family support makes a difference. Jose shared,

Oh yeah, as far as outside of school, yeah my family, absolutely. Always, always, supported me. Even to this day, my dad and my mom are like [jokingly] you should have been somebody that makes money, but then again, I'm like, yeah, family, and of course my brother, who has always been a graphic designer, and until this day, I talk to him like three or four times a week. I do a lot of [graphic design] work for him, so yeah, family always there.

And Allen:

Well the family is always there. I've got a really good family structure. I love my parents. I mean, not many people get parents like I've got. I was really lucky. I started dating Beth pretty early in the first semester I believe, and I'm with her still. We've been together 10 years now. I mean, she's always been there to lean on. That helps. She's bitching about a ring. I still haven't got it. It's terrible, 10 years in. She's got patience.

Kat also shared,

I had a good support system, my mom and my boyfriend helping me with my son. Letting me know its ok to focus on my school work and not feel guilty about it, and to let me know that its ok to be tired, and to go to sleep and to spend 24/7 at school and not be with my son. And it worries me so bad about what people think. And it shouldn't but it's like people always have something to say, and with my son being autistic, it's ten times worse, because they always have their mouth open. Telling me what I should and shouldn't do.

Leigh too, had both family support and that same type of family support from a family friend. Her family was living in Georgia, but she lived with a family friend while she attended college in North Carolina. She shared,

I would say my family was supportive and I would say mainly the people I lived with at the time. A good family friend, like I said, I had moved up here with. They were very supportive. I had a good support system. I had someone to talk to, someone if I needed a ride, that kind of thing. I was also working for her so income and a place to live. Just like they were our good family friend, so it's like family. I had a good home experience when I was at home, but just like they [the family friends] were very vested in me finishing school.

There was also a very different definition of “family” that was intertwined within the subcategories of teacher support, peer support and other. Family, not relatives or significant others, but family perceived as teachers and peers making up a college family. Zach created a support system that he called his “friend family.” This came up when I asked him who his support person was when he was in college. He said, “My friends pretty much, I think. I mean just my friends. I talked to my family on the phone, but I lived here alone. So really all I had was my friends, I kind of created a friend family.” This concept came up again when I asked Allen what were the major contributing factors in the most successful periods of his college experience. He shared the following:

I think good teachers. I mean obviously, the support. The students that were always willing to help. I mean it was a family like unit, it was. Everyone was always willing to help. And time, I had time and support. Not just from ya'll, but from the students, from the building itself, being open all kinds of hours. I was able to come and do things as I was working on the side. Availability. Of everybody, of students and faculty.

Kat also used a very similar term as she referred to the Graphic Design Department as “like a family.” She responded,

You need a place to ground yourself. Comparing BCC and PCC. It was so different. That's what made me love this program so much. I think that is why this program excels the way it does. Because ya'll pour yourselves into it. It's like a

family. BCC is nothing like that. Outside of the GRD Dept. people don't socialize. Once you go outside of our GRD classes its like going into a different world. There's not a lot of interaction, and teachers don't really understand, it's a whole different environment. You have to catch yourself, because we're so open, and so, I mean the way we interact with each other. The rest of the campus isn't like that. And you've got to remind yourself of that. That's what makes me love this program so much.

This idea of family or in Wally's case, home, a place where family resides, or more specifically, "feeling at home," came up when I asked Wally if he felt like he fit in the graphic design program. He shared,

I felt at home here in this program because while there were people who might not have cared for me too much, I never personally felt like someone was nitpicking at me or someone was talking about me. I never got that.

Out of all the participants DeAndre probably mentioned this idea of a college family the most. When I asked DeAndre to describe the types of support he needed as a student, this was his response.

Yes, you have to have support. I still have support from my family. My family is great. They're there for me 100%. My kids even want to learn what I know now. My son, he likes GRD. He stands by my shoulder and watches me do stuff. My family supports me. My friends support me. My teachers support me. All my teachers support me, yeah. The students that was in the class with me, all of us support each other. Everyone is a family. Really with GRD to me, you get family support from everybody. I get family support from home. I get family support from the school. I'm so happy to be a PCC Alumni now. I'm ready to put that sticker on my car. You need that support. I don't know how to tell anybody to make sure your family is backing you, because that's something you got to deal with, with your family. But even if they don't, you got family at PCC. Once you get to PCC, or the GRD program, you're going to become a family, because you're going to be around these people the whole time. I've learned at the end of GRD, everybody that's in there with you, we're a family and everybody keeps in contact.

When I asked DeAndre to tell me about his most memorable experience, he replied,

I've had a lot of experiences here at PCC. The most memorable one would be graduation. Oh my God. Graduation was the most powerful experience I've had since I've been here. This graduation, was my very first time graduating from anything. People were asking me why you putting all this stuff on Facebook? I'm like, "This is my first time graduating. You all don't understand this is new to me." I was excited. I had a ball.

When I asked DeAndre who was able to come to his graduation, he told me that in addition to his immediate family—his kids and his wife, that only a few of his family members showed up, his brother from his real dad and his brother's wife, but he said he didn't care. He said, "Other than that, I had nobody there, other than my GRD family. I didn't care. As long as they were there, I was good."

In wrapping up the category of support, support included the very straightforward subcategories of peer support and teacher support and how these two types of support played a very significant role in how the majority of participants perceived their own success. Other types of support were sometimes experienced individually by the participants and included financial support, spiritual support, extracurricular support, and support programs. The most interesting find, however, was related to the subcategory of "family" support and how the word family was interpreted by the participants. In the subcategory, giving and receiving peer support, I discussed how crucial peer support was, how it was beneficial to the participants and often assisted them in getting over problems they encountered. I believe that this subcategory, creating a "friend-family," rounds out that idea and exhibits another way peer-support is shown in the daily lives of the students as they refer to each other and their teachers as family. Students were able to grow as

they received validation of their work from both their teachers and their friends and were able to give of themselves to others.

Learning in a Connected Environment

The next category was formed because in addition to the participants experiencing a connectedness within the department, there was a yearning to learn. Rachel stated, “Everybody had the same mindset. Everybody was excited, and had a yearning to learn whatever this was . . . There was a connectedness there and I felt like, well, I have finally found what I am supposed to do.” Therefore, learning in a connected environment became the third main category with recognizing different types of learners, pushing back against too much textbook, engaging with learning, and having fun while learning as the subcategories. See Table 3.

Table 3

Learning in a Connected Environment with Subcategories

Category	Subcategories
LEARNING IN A CONNECTED ENVIRONMENT	Recognizing different types of learners
	Pushing back against too much textbook
	Engaging with learning
	Having fun while learning

Recognizing different types of learners. Fleming and Baume (2006) posit that there are four primary learning preferences: Visual, Aural, Read-write, and Kinesthetic (VARK). VARK was designed to be a starting place to assist both students and teachers

in thinking about and understanding how they learn. People learn using a variety of these modes, but one mode is usually dominant.

We have known for many years that people learn in different ways, yet the predominant method for demonstrating learning is the written word. Read/writers (R) prefer accessing information from printed words and use reading and writing as their first preference. The most common mode for information exchange is speech, which is associated with hearing and is therefore coded as aural (A). Visual learners (V) prefer to receive information in the form of graphs, charts, and diagrams but they are not restricted to picture information or enhancements using color and layout. They are sensitive to changing spatial arrangements and like to work with symbols. Kinesthetic learners (K) use all of their senses, including touch, hearing, smell, taste and sight. They prefer multi-sensory experiences and learn by doing. Kinesthetic learners can easily learn conceptual and abstract material as long as it accompanied by real life examples, analogies and or metaphors. They learn theory through application and prefer field trips, experiments, role-playing, games and experiential learning (Fleming, 1995).

The majority of the participants in this study consider themselves to be visual learners or kinesthetic learners, or a combination of those two, yet these two types of learners are not well served in postsecondary education. Problem-based teaching is rare though it would help because it uses a rich array of modes (Fleming, 1995). Graphic design, however, does lend itself nicely to visual and kinesthetic learners because students are given visual communication problems to solve in which they are required to apply their knowledge through the creation of visual solutions.

During his interview Zach talked about how he did not enjoy the way he was taught in high school and liked the way he was taught in graphic design better, as it catered to visual learners. He said,

I enjoyed learning. But everyone learns different. I think I didn't enjoy learning in high school, I just didn't enjoy the way I was taught, maybe. That could have been what it was, that could have been a factor, especially going into graphic design or art. You're taught differently, for me—people that are visual learners.

Leigh shared an example of how hands on learning worked much better for her both during home-school and in college. She recalled,

I would say with science, the reason I think I was so far ahead with science because I scored very well on that [GED] test is because we did a lot of outdoor stuff, a lot of hands-on things with the science. It's easier for me to comprehend. Put your hands on it and do the experiments and read about what you were doing.

The study of rocks, that was actually a lot of fun. Even then, that class, our professor in that, it was not even your typical class but there's a lot of hands-on. We were licking rocks. We were feeling rocks, rubbing them against your teeth, all that crazy stuff. It was very hands-on.

Being a visual learner also came up when I asked Allen to explain how various teaching approaches affected his success.

I'm a visual learner. You've got to show me stuff. I mean, add to that, I'm also kinesthetic, so you've got to let me do it. You can't just say, do this, this, this and this. You can't tell me. It just doesn't work that way for me. I think through being in the program, I would see people do things and then I would attempt to do them myself. You would give us a project, and I would do those projects as best I could, by learning online, learning with people, and doing things myself. You know what I mean?

Kevin and Andy also mentioned hands-on learning when I asked them to describe the types of classroom learning experiences they needed. Kevin said,

I believe the type of learning experience that I need is a personal one, one where there is less reading and more of a focus on hands-on experience. I guess I just felt like I could grasp concepts better when creating projects on the computer, rather than trying to decipher them from a book and how to turn them into a real world experience. I guess what I'm saying is that, there was nothing to it, but to just do it. Then it came to me easier.

And Andy shared as well,

I've always been better with hands-on stuff. I never really cared much for note taking. Although taking notes would help me learn, but I never would go back and re-read notes, and I still won't to this day re-read notes unless they're to-do lists.

Rachel describes herself as a visual learner and explained what that means to her and how she did and didn't experience teachers who catered to visual learners.

Well, I am a visual learner, and in order for me to be able to understand fully how to do something and comprehend the directions, I'm going to need to see a visual example of what it is. And when I'm thinking about grade school and high school, I don't remember where someone gave me a visual example of how to do something. I feel like if they had given me visual examples, I would have been a better student. I always felt like I was stumbling through school constantly, because I didn't understand how to put things together, so I would just give up on it and move on.

I learned the best and the most when I went to PCC. I have to say that because it's true. I don't know, maybe that's the reason why I like PCC so much, or why I enjoyed working there, etcetera, etcetera. Because it was the first time in my life that I actually had someone lay something out and give me a visual example. There would be a couple of times, I would be in a class with Stacy or a class with you, and I would be well how exactly do you do that, and the first response is, let me find a pen or pencil, or then you would draw on the board. Because had you explained that to me aurally, both of you knew I wasn't going to understand it. None of us really did. I never floundered in that environment because everybody

was a visual learner and our teachers knew how to communicate with visual learners. Visual examples were great, and I got a lot of that at PCC, but in high school I definitely did not get that. That's the way I am going to be successful. That's the reason why now, I have been able to be successful at the university level, because I know now that I have to ask the professors for examples.

I will also say that in order for me to receive examples here at GU in the general education classes to learn, I find I need to ask for them, rather than they are given to me. There are very few examples given unless I ask for them specifically.

But in my program examples are given. Maybe it's because ASL is a visual language and our professors understand that. My interpreting professor gave many examples and scenarios in order for us to remember and learn for the future. They were auditory but it was always a story, so I was capable of using my imagination. Now I do not remember everything she told us, and that's because I didn't actually see anything in order to connect that thought with something visual. I remember though, because of what I created [visually] in my imagination. So that helped a bit.

Lynn referred to visual learning too, when I asked her to discuss the various teaching approaches that she felt affected her success. She replied,

I would have to actually say your teaching style, because you would do visual and you would repeat and repeat and repeat until we were like, "Shut up, come on." I'm like, not really, but you know what I mean. We got it . . . Yeah, that type of teaching style. Seeing and hearing and doing, great teaching style for me.

The last example from Jose works nicely as a good conclusion to the subcategory of recognizing different types of learning and is a good lead in to the next subcategory, pushing back against too much textbook. When I asked Jose to talk about what teaching approaches did not work for him, he responded,

I think using the whole class time based on the textbook. That's not a good approach, and also treating the whole class as one is not a good approach either. Everybody has a different way to learn, some are faster, some are slower, some

need pictures, some need audio, whatever. And I mean that pretty generally applies to every class.

Pushing back against too much textbook. After completing the graphic design degree, Jose enrolled in the Web Technologies (WT) program. He did not complete the WT degree. He compared the two experiences between GD and WT.

The GD program was much better. It felt more organized. You actually got more involved in the classes. Whereas WT, I don't know if it was too new or what was the reason, but it felt just too much textbook. You know, open your book to chapter 8 and turn in your work while I'm here. You're done at 8:00.

Andy shared his experience with classes that focused solely on rote memorization and regurgitation and how he didn't know how to study for those classes, and found them boring. He shared,

The Psychology class I wound up taking that at least twice. I didn't know how to study. If I wanted to go to sleep all I had to do was sit down at the kitchen table with that Psychology book, open it, and I'd wind up with a seam down my face.

When Allen and I discussed how various teaching approaches affected his success, he first addressed his learning style, and then he further elaborated on what teaching tactics he needs teachers to utilize to help him learn.

Teachers that would discuss with people, not the teacher that would hand you the book and say answer these questions, but the teachers that would get analytical on things. I mean you need to show me a reason to be into anything. I mean that's the only way I've been able to learn. Without interest I don't learn. So, if a teacher can't develop interest in me, by discussing things, then I don't give attention to it. For the most part here at PCC almost all my teachers were really good at that. The marketing teacher was a little boring. She was a book reader. She wanted me to read this chapter, answer these questions. Fill out this information. I mean I can

force myself through that, but that's what that is, forcing myself to learn, and I'm not going to learn well that way. And they did have a few hands on projects, and I would begin to get into some of that stuff, but without having the base interest, even doing the physical projects are just moot. It's just work to work basically.

Wally talked about the problems with textbook learning and what he needs to help him learn.

I love the teaching method that you guys have because you're not just forcing the information down my throat. I guess just with the graphic design I feel you're giving us the opportunity to be expressive. I think that's the best way to learn, is to be able to give someone the opportunity to be expressive. I can identify with something if I've been through it already or I can experience it. I can't identify with you just putting a book in front of me and saying, "Okay. Read this." The only time I will understand it is if that book is in front of me. When you take that book away from me, I'm not going to know what you're talking about. I think that giving me the ability to be able to express myself and to be able to put my own spin on it helps me learn.

Many of the participants did not perform well when teachers primarily used lecture-based or textbook teaching and desired a more engaging experience from both their teachers and their classmates. In a previous section Rachel complained about a lack of engagement from her teachers in both high school and the first community college she attended. She talked about the different methods that the teachers at PCC used to engage students, such as field trips and watching films, and how those different experiences helped her learn.

Engaging with learning. Zach talked about the major differences between learning in high school and learning in college. He shared that it helps when you're learning about a subject that you are interested in, and that you get to make more choices concerning your education when you are in college.

One of the major differences is the way classes are taught, and I mean, in college, I mean you're going into a field. In high school it's more general, you know, you're taking math, maybe one art class. I mean you get some electives, but not a lot of choices. In college you take a lot of classes you want to take, you still have to take some basic classes in English and math, but then in college you get to go into your field, and you get to learn about things you want to learn about. So it makes it more interesting to learn, you're more interested in focusing in the classes.

I pretty much loved all my teachers, all the classes, I mean the hard classes, I mean even that. It's even good for you to take those classes that you don't want to do sometimes. I think college is a great growing and learning experience. I wish everyone in the world could go to college.

For Zach, taking classes in his chosen program of study and being able to choose his electives made for a more engaged learning environment. For Kat, it was rewarding to be able to apply her knowledge and being engaged in the production of the portfolio made her feel good. She recalled, “. . . and then the Portfolio Show, the sense of completion and then the fact that, for me, since I printed everything, to see it hung. I was like yeah, I felt good. I like printing.” Being a lab tech and printing the students' work paid off for her in the long run, as she earned a fulltime position in the area of printing and production and is very happy in that area of the field.

For Kat and Rachel, the trip to DC to the National Portfolio Review and the students' portfolio show at the Museum of Art were two of their most memorable experiences in college. The application of their knowledge into a project based exhibition of their graphic design and photography work gave them a sense of great accomplishment. Rachel shared,

. . . and then the portfolio show, and we are all trying to get our work out for the public to see, even a potential employer to hire us, and we worked so hard to do it.

It was an accomplishment you could see at the end. I can't believe that I did all that.

When I asked Joseph about the major contributing factors in his most successful periods in college he replied, "First I have to figure out what my most successful periods were, so I guess that would be the second year up to portfolio show. I liked when everyone was running around busy, I felt like we were really doing something." Joseph enjoyed the hustle and bustle of engaged students working on the preparation of the exhibition and the completion of their portfolios.

Leigh previously complained about the online teacher she had under the Web Technologies program and the fact that it took him forever to answer her emails. She felt that with online classes the majority of the learning is the responsibility of the student, but it frustrated her that she had to push for the instructor to be interested in the student's position. However, one of the aspects of the course that she did like was that she was able to immediately apply what she was learning. She also liked that she was able to apply her knowledge to the graphic design projects she was working on in the graphic design program. She explained,

It was completely online. I was doing web development and working, so I was able to immediately implement anything I learned in class in real life. I feel like I picked it up faster that way, because I was able to turn around and use it. Graphic design, when I was a student in the program, I learned a lot, and I implemented it through the projects and stuff.

Wally mentioned in several different places his disdain of textbook learning. It was such a powerful statement that I think it's worth repeating here. He stated, "I can't

identify with you just putting a book in front of me and saying, 'Okay. Read this.' The only time I will understand it is if that book is in front of me. When you take that book away from me, I'm not going to know what you're talking about." In this section on "engaged learning", Wally talks about not liking lecture based classes and how they can't keep his attention. He shared, "Honestly, I'm not a school person. Sitting down in a classroom listening to a teacher. I don't know. My mind wanders a lot. That is the most difficult thing for me to do is to buckle down and sit in a classroom and actually focus, unless it's something that really draws my attention." This past semester, he had a great experience in a class that is traditionally taught as a lecture based class. He explains how this class was more engaging and how it was different than traditional lecture based classes he had previously experienced.

I can also say something about my sociology teacher that I have right now, Ms. Hartley, very unique person. She's a very unique woman. She's very strict on a lot of things. I can actually say I enjoy her class. That's a rarity for me because I hate school, but I enjoy her class even with all of her rules and regulations. She's not one of those who just has a generic brand of teaching. She allows us to interact and she wants us to give her feedback. You know what I'm saying? She wants us to express what we think on the subject or how we feel about a subject. I think that helps a lot versus just putting a book in my face and saying, "Here it is. I'm going to talk about it now. You're going to have a test on it and then we're not going to talk about it anymore." I can say that she's one [general education] teacher that has stood out to me. The others are just generic.

There were many experiences that the participants shared that they felt made their educational endeavors engaging. Being able to choose a major that they were interested in was key. In addition, when they were also able to apply what they were learning in the classroom outside of the classroom, in a broader context, learning became more exciting

and rewarding. Being able to share their work and their knowledge with others and receive positive feedback was validating and motivated the students to continue their learning.

Having fun while learning. Many of the participants expressed that having fun while learning made a substantial difference in their overall success. Rachel talked about this concept of fun when I asked her what she expected to experience as a college student. She shared,

I had no idea what it was going to be like. I thought that it would be classrooms and writing. I had no idea. I didn't think that it would be as fun. I think I thought that it would be like high school. I mean, you sit in the classroom, and you learn and stuff, but it was much more laid back. I definitely didn't think that it would be that fun, or that great, or that wonderful. I had no idea that it was going to be that good, but it was, and I knew it from the first day I walked in the classroom.

She also referenced her trip to the National Portfolio Review in Washington, DC as being fun.

Going to DC was fun. I thought that was really cool that we went to a different place. I think that was really a big highlight. I had never been to DC before, and seeing other people with their work, it was amazing to see that there were that many other artists in the world, that they are all trying to do the same thing that you were.

Wally also shared,

It taught me so much, but it was fun. It was really fun. I think that's why I did so strongly in those classes because I learned, but you guys made it fun. That may sound cheesy. It may sound like it was rehearsed, but it's the truth. You guys made graphic design fun for me.

DeAndre said he was fine with lecture-based classes, as long as they were “fun and energetic.” He shared his experience in an English 111 lecture-based class that he considered fun. He felt adding the element of fun was the reason why he performed well. He also told me about a lecture based programming class which he took when he was in the Computer Programming major where he did not do as well.

Like I said lecture classes . . . I’m fine with them just as long as you make it fun and energetic. Most of his classes [English teacher] was lecture based. He would give a lecture and we learned a lot about each other and a lot about him and a lot about ourselves in that class. It was real easy to write papers off of that. I love to write. I just don’t, I don’t know why. My thing with writing is when I start, it’s hard for me to find an end point, or sum up what I’m saying, as you can see with me talking right now. I can’t stick to the topic.

The computer programming [classes], a couple of the teachers, they just jump up there. They write on the board. They say what they say and then you catch it, or you don’t catch it. I didn’t catch it . . . until much later . . . when I was no longer in the program.

As previously mentioned, Kat shared that her most memorable experience in college was the portfolio show and the Washington DC trip to the National Portfolio Review. She talked about how exciting the field trip was for her.

The DC trip was the first time I’ve ever been out of North Carolina. It was the first time I’d ever been on a train. It was the first time I’ve ever stayed in a hotel like that. It was so many first times for me. It meant so much for me to be able to do that. Like, it opened up so many opportunities, I was so grateful for it. I had never done anything like that before. I couldn’t even believe colleges did anything like that. I was like . . . I was so excited.

Having fun in their college classes was not something that these participants particularly expected, but it made them want to be in the program. Being able to have fun also got

them excited about learning. The experiences the participants had outside the classroom, such as when traveling to Washington, DC with their classmates, had a huge impact on their overall learning experience as well. The last main category for this study addresses the different instances of freedom that were experienced by the participants.

Table 4

Experiencing Freedom with Subcategories

Category	Subcategories
EXPERIENCING FREEDOM	Having the freedom of choice
	Being who you are
	Learning through self-expression

Experiencing Freedom

Freedom was another theme that showed prevalence during discussions of the other categories. Rachel talked about feeling as though she was on an equal level with her instructors in the AGD program and with one of her instructors at BCC when I asked her about her relationships with faculty members. She said, “But then at PCC, it was different. I didn’t have to call you Ms. El or Ms. Willard, or Ms. Stacy or Ms. Jarrell. It was Stacy and El on a first name basis and it felt equal.” Allen mentioned freedom specifically, when I asked him about the differences between his high school experience and his college experience. He stated,

Just the freedom basically . . . Here it was like do what you want to, as long as you pass the class, I think it was fine. You know what I mean. I mean you had a certain amount of days of course [that you could miss]. As long as you got

through the work, it was fine. And that's what I was always good at. I could do the work. I just didn't like the schedule, the rigidity of it. High school was terrible for that.

There were also two other instances when both Rachel and Allen brought up this idea of freedom when discussing relationships with faculty members. Allen said, "Coming here was like a breath of fresh air, it really was. You and Stacy were awesome. You were understanding. You weren't on top of me all the time. You let people do their thing." Rachel talked about how college is just more freeing in general when she discussed the comparison between high school and college. She recalls,

You have more freedom in college to do what you want, but that's just the policies because you are an adult. There are not a lot of restrictions. In high school, there were too many restrictions. It was too regimented. You have to do this, you have to sit here. It's not like let everybody sit where they want to.

There were several other instances of freedom that formed the three subcategories of experiencing freedom, having the freedom of choice, being who you are, and learning through self-expression.

Having the freedom of choice. This idea of freedom of choice emerged from the interviews when discussing the major contributing factors in a student's most successful periods in college, when they shared how they felt they fit into the program and their classroom learning experiences. Zach talked about being able to choose class times that worked with his schedule, and not having to worry about missing a day of school if he needed to take a day off. When I asked him to share with me the major contributing factors in the most successful periods of his college experience, he replied,

One thing is just the way college is taught, you get to choose what times work for you. It can revolve around your life if you're working, if you have kids. You can choose a schedule that's more flexible, and if you're sick a day, it's ok, you can find out what you missed and study at home.

Joseph liked having the freedom to decide how he was going to sequence his general education classes. Some students take their general education requirements alongside the graphic design classes. Some, like Joseph, choose to put them off until the end and take an extra semester or two to complete the general education classes by themselves. He shared,

I liked being able to just focus on graphic design. It was kind of like going here was like it turned me on to a whole other type of art, and that was like really interesting to me at the time. I didn't want to stop doing that, and then have to do some English paper or something. I have a mind like that. I get hooked on one thing. So it lets me focus a little bit more.

Leigh and others talked about the freedom of choice they had in their graphic design classes and how that freedom related to the subject matter of their class projects.

You were allowed to come up with subjects for many of the projects and that made it interesting for you. I would say that approach is very, very good. I would say for the majority of the classes it was that way, even like the drawing class. You were still allowed to pick the style you drew in or the subject matter itself. So being allowed to be creative allowed you to kind of push yourself.

In photography we were given a project to do which you were allowed to pick the subject matter. We were told to take some images all black and white but you were allowed to decide what that looked like. I think that was very helpful. Especially in the creative field I think that is a big plus. I mean your creativity isn't stifled.

DeAndre talked about having too many distractions in high school. When he was in college, being able to choose his own way to block out some of those distractions was relaxing to him and gave him more confidence about being able to get his work done. Our students work on their graphic design projects in class and outside of class in the computer labs. DeAndre liked having the freedom to figure out a way to take care of the outside disturbances. He stated,

It was hard to learn in high school, because I fell into many distractions . . . Then getting my GED was relaxing, because I learn better and faster on my own without distractions. That's why when I come to college I was like, okay we can have headphones in here. We can have headphones, cool. I can probably do this.

The participants enjoyed the general freedom that they experienced in college versus the lack of freedom they experienced in high school. Being able to make their own decisions as adults and being seen as equals with their teachers made college a more empowering experience. They liked having a choice in the subject matter of many of their graphic design projects and choosing how much of themselves to incorporate into their projects.

Being who you are. Another important aspect of “freedom” was the freedom to be who you are. In the beginning interviews I asked the participants if they felt like they fit in their chosen program of study and what factors influenced this view. I also asked them about their relationships with their teachers and their classmates. Some participants beyond a shadow of a doubt felt like the program was a good fit. Zach replied,

Oh yeah, definitely, because that's where I made to this day, some of my best friends ever, coming to college, for life, you know. Meeting them here, and being in a new area, definitely, it's almost like going to a whole new world. And you come and you find, I don't know, just a place where you definitely feel accepted,

at least in our program. Maybe other programs too, where people are passionate about their field, and other people are too, and you probably have that connection.

Allen recalled,

Yeah, I feel like I fit in. I mean the people I was in the program with, I felt like they were all pretty similar to me. We all kinda came from different backgrounds. It didn't seem like anybody was particularly stuck up or anything like that. So for the most part I fit in with people in the program.

I think they were pretty good for the most part. I got along with a wide variety of people that were here. I fit in better with the people that were more similar to me. I mean Jake, and Nathan, I mean the white guys, basically, I mean we all kind of clicked. But I did a good job as far as branching out, you know with Trayvon and Todd, the black guys in the group, and Amy. She was kind of an odd one. I've always kind of liked to pull people together as best as possible, bridge people. It's not always possible.

Other students needed a little more time to get comfortable. Joseph recalled,

Yeah, it was awesome going here. I loved it here. I guess I was a little nervous first coming here. Especially having to put artwork on the board. But I was pretty friendly with most everyone here. No one ever got in any squabbles. Most people were mature, and I felt pretty comfortable after like, the first semester, with the instructors, and my classmates.

Rachel talked about the lack of being able to find a place to fit in at her first college. She didn't find a place where she felt comfortable, or where she felt that she did fit, until she attended PCC. She stated,

I was definitely floating at BCC, because there was nothing for me to jump into. There was no program there that I was really interested in. They really only had nursing, cosmetology, and BLET. So I just kind of floated. But when I went to PCC, and I went into the office for the first time, and I saw that my department chair had an eyebrow ring and she was wearing cargo pants. I was like, is this really her, because everybody at BCC was so old. They were so rigid. So then

when I talked to you, and you told me about the program, and I kind of felt immediately that this was where I wanted to be.

Some participants needed a bit more time to figure out with which individuals they fit best. Kat shared,

Here it was good. The first semester was the hardest. Getting to know everybody. Learning where you fit in. Learning what you could say. Who you could trust. I mean I connected more so with people who were my age, or I had common interests, like some of the students I became friends with, we all gamed.

Leigh stated that she felt accepted, but wasn't even sure who she really was at that point in her life. She noted,

Well, yes I didn't feel discriminated against. I was pretty young when I started the program. I didn't even really know who I was then, but I didn't feel discriminated against or looked down on or felt like anyone disliked me or anything like that. If they did I didn't know.

When I asked Wally if he felt like he fit in the graphic design program, he stated,

I've seen so many different types of personalities in this program. I don't think that anyone particularly fits in this program. I think this program is a great program for the reason that you don't have to fit in. You don't have to conform into this person to be accepted here. Everybody here has their own opinions. Everybody believes in different ways. Everybody views themselves in different ways but it's widely accepted in this program.

Because of Wally's response to this question concerning fit, I tweaked the question in later interviews and asked more specifically if the participants felt that they were accepted by their instructors and their classmates, and if they felt that they were able to be themselves. DeAndre replied,

Oh, God yeah. All my teachers, every last one of my GRD teachers are down to earth. They are real people. They don't act like robots. Like I said, it's my second family. I felt right at home here with all the teachers. If I had any problems, I could talk to anybody. Never got judged, nothing. Everybody is cool. I love my teachers. I love all my teachers. I swear I do.

Allen responded,

I feel like one of my driving forces in college was how accepting my professors were. In standard [general education] classes I felt like the students were just getting by and not trying to make friends, but in the GD program there was more of a family vibe.

Rachel shared,

At BCC I only felt accepted by my English instructor and all of my classmates were all different and we were all disconnected. The students were all distant and the instructors were just going through the motions. They just didn't connect well with anyone. I did make one lifelong friend from there [BCC], but at PCC I made 20 because I felt connected to them all. We all have a connection—design. We're all visual learners and enjoyed learning design. At PCC it was different. I felt immediately accepted. I think that came from doing work, showing it to my teachers and they would give feedback and say what they liked and didn't. That made me feel like they cared because they were willing to help me work through what wasn't working. It felt like they cared, and so in return that made me feel accepted by them. Talking to me like an equal and feeling equal was the best environment for me and that too made me feel accepted. I was able to be myself at PCC and felt free to express whatever idea I wanted. I never felt like an idea was stupid because it was met with an accepting response.

Once I decided to change the question to asking participants if they felt accepted by their instructors, I also asked that same question of Wally. He stated, "Absolutely. I absolutely do think as far as you guys that I was accepted. Further back—no, which is half the reason why I left." Wally's statement speaks to one of the main reasons why he feels he was able to persist in college and not in high school. Wally's comparison of not being

accepted in high school, which made him want to leave, versus his acceptance in college, which made him want to stay, helped him to persist and is exactly what the data uncovered for many of the participants in the study.

Learning through self-expression. DeAndre touched on the importance of “freedom of expression” when he spoke about the fun he had in his English 111 class. He liked that in addition to learning about the content taught in the English class, he was also able to learn about his professor, his classmates and even about himself. DeAndre liked writing, and he also liked being able to write about things that he could relate to, and things that mattered to him. Adding that personal component and being able to express himself made the writing come easy. He also learned that his weakness was summing up the topic at hand, and he applied that knowledge during our interview as he verbally made note to me several times that he was trying harder to stay on topic.

Wally shared how being able to express himself not only helped him learn, but also helped him to retain information. He shared,

I feel like anything that allows me to express myself, generally I feel like I have a better outcome in that type of environment. Of course, I know you need your basic education, your English, your math, and all that. I understand that. But I’m not that type of person that you can just throw information at and expect to get it. It will not retain for me unless I’m able to put my own spin on it. It’s the only way I learn. I guess that’s one of the main reasons why I had so much difficulty in high school, because it’s just like I can’t just sit there and listen to you talk. It’s not going to work.

Freedom of expression also came up when I asked Leigh about teaching approaches that affected her success. She gave several examples from several different classes. Leigh believes that the freedom to express herself stopped her creativity from

being stifled. She also noted that freedom of expression made it more interesting to the individual. She also noted how important being able to express oneself is in a creative field.

Like I said, they [teachers] were very interested in how we did. If you had questions they were always there to answer and to walk you through. I think the critiques helped a lot, even the student to student critiques, I mean with being creative, a lot of those classes are trying to make you more creative than anything else. You're left to come up with our own ideas. We were given parameters, but they weren't so stringent that you were locked into a certain way of thinking. Does that make any sense?

Joseph's experience in his English 111 class was obviously very different than DeAndre's and Allen's experience because Joseph felt that you can't really have freedom of expression in an English class, yet other participants' experiences showed differently. However, Joseph did feel that having freedom of expression is why he persisted until the point of graduation. He shared,

I felt like this program had the structures to where it was necessary, but it wasn't like, it wasn't like to the nth degree. I mean you guys would give us an outline, and then we could work within that. Whereas I feel like, some of the Gen Ed teachers here, have been very like, just more formal, and I guess that's to be expected, because you can't teach English, hippy dippy like that, but that's just the nature of it, but I think that's the major differences, which is why, I stayed in this program until I finished.

Because of the recognition of how freedom was an important aspect for several of the participants, I went back and asked other participants questions concerning this idea of freedom. Allen shared the following when I asked him if he felt like he had "freedom of expression" in his college assignments. He stated,

I did feel a greater sense of freedom in almost all of my college classes in comparison with high school. For instance, if I wrote a heavily political or social or depressing paper in English, they wouldn't worry so much about the message, but more on the structure and grammar. In high school they would likely send you to a counselor.

The freedom to express yourself without administration issues, the freedom to create your own schedule and to choose classes that interested me made college much more pleasurable than high school.

Kevin replied,

Yes, I do. With all the projects that we did, I feel like we were permitted to put a personal spin on anything as long as we followed the specs of the project. I feel grateful to have had this experience because I feel like it helped me think “outside the box” personally, and not just academically. I didn't feel that way in high school. That being said, I believe that having instructors and fellow classmates that were open minded, and not restricted by social norms, meant everything to me as to help ease the pressure of doing what it took to actually pass the class, which also made it easier to create something worthwhile.

Rachel shared,

I would say this was mostly done at PCC. Most all general education classes don't give you the ability to express yourself because you have to follow all these rules and there's really no room for you to “color outside the lines” or add your ideas or whatever to them—math, science, history, economics, etcetera. English class, for me seemed more open for expression out of the basic subjects. In English class you might get a paper that asks you to write about a most memorable moment of your life. This allows for more expression.

But at the end of all of that, even now at GU, the freedom of expression came from PCC. I know I sound redundant talking about PCC so much but as an artist you were able to be an artist. You could do almost anything you wanted to as long as you followed the guidelines and designed it successfully and communicated the appropriate message. An example would be the self-portrait at the end of our last semester. We could literally design anything we wanted as long as it conveyed who we were as a person and it communicated in a well-designed way! But it wasn't just that one project. I felt we had freedom of expression with every

project we had, after the first few projects. Our product packaging was whatever we wanted to do. It didn't matter. Every project really was open.

I'd like to also add, one thing I always think about is "Can I create something with this?" No matter what it is. If I can't create anything with it, I don't find it useful. I personally do not grow or make significant advancements if I cannot create. When I go to throw a plastic container away I first look to see if I can create something useful out of it or just create something with it in general. Every time I go to buy a product I always think "I'm not going to buy what I can create at home."

"Creating" has played a significant role in my life. I have become smarter because I am creative and was given freedom to express that. Because I was allowed to let my hands produce what my mind created, that visual connection allowed my mind to learn new things. Because I saw myself in my work it allowed me to better it, learn from it and learn about many other things as well. The more freedom I had the more I learned. I feel like if I was being held back from expressing myself (not giving me freedom) my mind wouldn't have opened up the way it needed to in order for more information to come in. That sounds crazy I know, but I'm basically saying having freedom to express yourself gives you an open mind. If you have an open mind, you can go so many places with that.

During my conversation with Wally about what practices he believes create a student environment that encourages persistence, he said, "Everybody's supposed to be heard. Everybody wants their voice or their opinion to matter." Wally felt when he was given the opportunity to express himself and was allowed to put his own spin on it, having that freedom helped him learn.

Having some freedom in general, when compared to the high school classroom, made a big difference in the overall attitude about school that the participants brought with them when they entered the college classroom. The freedom to make simple choices like scheduling and choosing which general education classes to take and the freedom to take a day off when needed were also important. The participants felt that having the freedom to express themselves as unique individuals allowed them to feel comfortable in

their own skin and comfortable sharing their ideas, and this freedom also helped them learn.

Selective Coding

The last step in performing the data analysis is selective coding. Selective coding is “the process of integrating and refining the theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 143). One of the techniques suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998) to assist in the integration of the concepts and identifying the central category is “writing the storyline.” Writing the story line helps explain what is happening in the data.

This study consisted of thirteen interviews with GED earners who earned their associate degree in an Advertising & Graphic Design program. The overarching research question that guided this study was, “What conditions and experiences lead to associate degree attainment for GED earners enrolled in a graphic design program in one North Carolina community college? The participants graduated as long ago as 2001 and as recently as the summer of 2016. Many of the participants have very vivid memories as to the reasons they feel they were not successful in high school, and the reasons why they believe they did succeed in college.

Most of the participants chose to leave high school because it was not a good fit for them. Two of the participants left because of pregnancy. Three were educated at home, and two of those participants never stepped foot inside a classroom until they entered the college classroom. All three of the home-school participants recalled gaps and challenges in their learning. All of the participants described their educational

experiences in the graphic design program as gratifying, with some having a few bumps in the road along the way as they progressed along their path to graduation.

Conditions and experiences leading to persistence were fairly consistent across participants, and led to the creation of the four main categories. The complexity of these four categories was illustrated by the use of subcategories. By grouping the categories according to their properties and dimensions, the four main categories and their subcategories emerged: (1) *interacting in the classroom*, with the subcategories of needing individualized attention, reacting to the classroom environment, enjoying competition in the classroom, building relationships with teachers, and connecting with peers, (2) *participating in a multiplicity of support*, with the subcategories of receiving and giving peer support, experiencing teacher support, having financial and other forms of support, and creating a “friend-family”, (3) *learning in a connected environment*, with recognizing different types of learning, pushing back against too much textbook, engaging with learning, and having fun while learning as the subcategories and (4) *experiencing freedom*, with the subcategories of having the freedom of choice, being who you are, and learning through self-expression.

A central or core category may evolve out of the existing categories, or a researcher may decide that each category only tells part of story, and therefore a more abstract term or phrase is needed to form an explanatory whole (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest the use of a scheme or “paradigm” to sort out and organize the emerging connections among the categories. The basic components of this paradigm include the *conditions* (a conceptual way of grouping answers to the questions

why, where, how come, and when), the *actions/interactions* (responses made to issues, problems, happenings, or events that arise under those conditions), and the *consequences* (outcomes of the actions and or interactions).

I found that the four main categories, (a) *interacting in the classroom*, (b) *participating in a multiplicity of support*, (c) *learning in a connected environment*, and (d) *experiencing freedom* did indeed only tell part of the story, and that it was a combination of the four conditions that created an environment that these participants felt was necessary for their success and assisted in their completion of the program. Finding the interconnectivity of these four categories brought to light the central phenomenon, which I propose is *a culture of persistence*. I will thoroughly discuss this theory after I first address how I used the extant literature as it related specifically to my findings and to help me refine the theory of *a culture of persistence*.

Using Literature in the Data Analysis

Because literature is often accessed as it becomes relevant during and after data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I often returned to the extant literature, and used the literature on persistence to ask additional questions during and after the interview process, and to help me refine my theory. When I found that an existing theory related closely to the data, I used constant comparison to determine what part or parts of the theory were relevant for my study. I now confirm my findings and also illustrate where the literature is “incorrect, is overly simplistic, or only partially explains the phenomena” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 52).

As previously mentioned, the majority of persistence studies completed to date use Tinto's models as either a foundation or a springboard, and because of the depth and the number of studies he has performed, it is extremely hard not to be influenced by Tinto's work. However, I was very careful to not let this knowledge influence my data collection, and I kept an open mind to developing new theory from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The most extreme contradictions I see between my study and the existing theories on persistence include the emphasis and importance placed on the background and pre-college experiences of college students (Tinto, 1975, 1993; Bean, 1980; Bean & Metzger, 1985; Braxton et al., 2004; Braxton et al., 1997; Patterson et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2011). My data showed that the participant's background and pre-college experiences were far less important than in most dominant persistence theories. Another contradiction between the findings in my research and the literature is the extreme focus on the necessity of students integrating into the social life of the institution (Bean, 1980; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1997, 2012). The data from my study showed that the participants were part of a social life within the department, which took the place of integrating into the social life of the institution. Finally, in the bulk of the literature on persistence there is an intense focus on external factors regardless of whether outside the classroom but still within the institution, or factors that are completely external to the college (Bean & Metzger, 1985; Cabrera et al., 1992; Braxton et al., 2014; Braxton et al., 2004). What I found was that while external factors do affect community college students, the effects

are mitigated by support found within the classroom and the graphic design department. I will now elaborate on these findings as they relate to the participants' experiences.

Most persistence models place a great deal of emphasis on a student's background and pre-college experiences and use those factors to predict or lay cause to the departure of a student. In fact, Bean and Metzger (1985) state that they included background variables, "not only because they appear in most conceptual models, but also because past behavior is expected to predict future behavior" (p. 492). The data that I collected is contradictory to this literature.

In my study the data concerning the student's background and pre-college experiences are shared only to give a history of the individual and to make known that those factors are *not always* accurate predictors of departure. Because my participants took an alternate route to obtain a high school equivalency credential they were statistically predicted to fail due to their GED status. They were predicted to fail in obtaining an associate degree since nationally, only "only 3% [of GED earners] acquired at least an associate's degree" (Tyler, 2005, p. 72), and in the most recent study completed to date of two GED cohorts (Zhang et al., 2011) that number had only increased to 12%. In fact, leaving high school and earning the GED, according to the U.S. Department of Education, puts these participants in the "at risk" category of leaving college before graduation. Long and Mullin (2014) note that

the U.S. Department of Education categorizes "nontraditional college students" as those who have one or more of these seven "factors" of predictive risk: (1) having delayed enrollment, (2) having children at home, (3) being a single parent, (4) attending college part-time, (5) being financially independent, (6) working

fulltime while enrolled in a postsecondary institution, and (7) being a GED certificate holder (NCES Fast Facts, 2002). (p. xviii)

Academic accomplishment—earning a GED, is lumped together with social and financial characteristics as an at-risk factor. Thus, GED students are considered nontraditional students who are at risk of not graduating (Long & Mullin, 2014). Yet, the participants in my study, who are all coded by the college as GED earners, beat the odds and were successful in earning their associate degree.

In fact, five of the thirteen participants were recipients of the college's Academic Excellence Awards. To receive this award a student must be nominated by a faculty member. The student must be in the second year of the program and have completed at least 24 credit hours. The student must also have given service to the college or the community and have at least a 3.5 grade point average. A committee of faculty and staff decide which nominees will be the recipients of the award. Because of their GED status these participants were predicted to fail, but instead they not only completed their associate degree, but the majority of them excelled. Rachel was one of the five participants who received an academic excellence award. She was very proud of this accomplishment as it was the first time she had received any type of recognition for anything in her life.

Lynne was another participant that received an academic excellence award. In addition to receiving this award, she also received one of the top two academic scholarship awards. These award recipients are chosen from among the academic excellence award winners by the president of the college. Lynne was one of the top two

students honored that year in receiving the President's Scholarship. Prior to attending the ceremony, Lynne knew she was getting an academic excellence award, but she never dreamed she would be awarded the President's Scholarship. She had struggled so much in home school, because it was such a challenge for her family members to understand how to teach her. She never dreamed she would receive such an honor and admits that she wasn't even paying attention when they announced the winner and therefore barely caught her name when they called her up to receive the award.

In addition to placing great emphasis on a student's background and pre-college experiences Tinto claims that students are more likely to persist if they become connected to the academic and social life of the institution. Because of this postulation concerning social integration, Bean and Metzger (1985), Braxton et al. (1997) and Braxton et al. (2004) suggest the need for a serious revision to Tinto's theory. They believe the theory to be inapplicable to two-year commuter institutions, because community college students are assumed to lack the time to participate in activities that would facilitate social integration.

My findings disagree with this assumption, and I posit that students that commute to college actually do have the time and the opportunities to socially integrate. What these researchers missed is the differentiation between the different types of degree programs offered by the community college. There are two types of degree programs offered by the community college. One is the university transfer degree (either an associate of arts, an associate of fine arts, or an associate of science degree) and the other is an associate of applied science degree.

Bean and Metzger (1985), Braxton et al. (1997), and Braxton et al. (2004) found that commuter students often *do not* have the time to commit to social integration. I concur with these researchers but *only if* they were researching students enrolled specifically in the university transfer programs of commuter institutions. There are two reasons for this. One reason is due to the sheer number of college transfer courses and sections (over hundreds) that are offered by the college. Because of the multitude of offerings very rarely do the same students end up in the same class sections. Therefore, it is unusual for them to get to know each other very well if they rarely have more than one class together. One class would only give the students a total of three hours per week together, either in a 50-minute block three times per week, or a one hour and 20-minute block two times per week. Second, for those transfer students who would like to be involved on campus, there are very limited opportunities or events put on by the institution that would allow them to become more socially integrated, and when these events are offered, turnout is typically very low. This could be because of other outside commitments students might have including work or family. Also, sometimes when the university to which the students intend to transfer is in the same city as the community college, the students are often more interested in socially integrating with the students at the university. The community college students often attend sporting events and other social activities held by the university and other affiliated groups instead of events at the community college where they are enrolled. Therefore, if the studies these researchers performed focused on students in the university transfer programs of the community colleges, their postulations about commuter students not having time to socially integrate

are most likely accurate. However, in solely focusing on the university transfer student, they missed an important population of the community college.

When a student is enrolled in any of the applied science programs, like graphic design, they have more than enough time to socially integrate, especially while in the classroom. Part of this is due to the applied science degrees having lab time built into the overall classroom time. Students in the AGD program spend Monday through Thursday from approximately 8:30 am to 3:00 pm in the same classes with the same group of students. The first-year students are also required to clock seven hours of lab time each week in the computer labs outside of their normal classroom meeting time. The labs are open to the students until 10:00 pm Monday through Thursday, 9:00 am to 3:00 pm on Friday, 10:00 am to 4:00 pm on Saturdays, and 12:00 pm to 6:00 pm on Sundays. In addition to the time spent in the classrooms, open computer labs give the students additional time to socially integrate. This means the students spend at least 30 hours per week together the first year of the program, 23 hours in the classrooms and seven outside the classroom in the computer labs. Evidence of these interactions are documented by the words of the participants throughout the dissertation and especially in the section on peer support. In addition to the time in the classrooms and the required lab hours outside the classroom which created opportunities for social integration, this study also showed that there were other opportunities for social integration, including various field trips, especially the trip to DC, as well as graphic design club events on campus such as the college's Fall Fest, Spring Fling, and Summer Splash.

My findings agree with Tinto's theory that social integration is an important factor in persistence, but *only* in relationship to social integration within the AGD department. I did not find that social integration within the institution as a whole was a necessary component. The happenings that took place during the social interactions in the classrooms, in the labs, during field trips, and at department events sponsored by the college did play an important and complex role. What happened in particular in these spaces had a huge impact on the participants in this study and those happenings are the foundation for the grounded theory that emerged from the data.

While there has been a great deal of research that addresses the role of pedagogy, curriculum, and classroom activities as predictors of student learning, there has not been a tremendous amount of research that focuses on the role of the classroom as it applies to persistence (Tinto, 1997). Prior to Tinto (1997) and as early as 1980, Pascarella found that faculty student interaction outside the classroom was a key factor in persistence. Astin (1984) theorized that students with more interaction with faculty and/or peers in or outside the classroom are more likely to persist. Tierney (2000) placed great emphasis on the interactions and relationships between students, their families, and their teachers. These researchers have focused on the important role that faculty play, but more so in connection to the relationships that faculty members need to build with students. Braxton et al. (2000) concluded that classroom activities are related to a student's decision to stay or to leave. My research agrees that faculty-student relationships and classroom activities as they relate to learning in the classroom are an important part of persistence. However, peer-to-peer relationships are as crucial and as equally important as the faculty-student

relationships. My research shows there is a complex mix of happenings in the classroom, and the combination of relationships and the learning that takes place creates the conditions of the classroom environment.

Tinto's (1997) study was one of the first studies to really examine the happenings inside the college classroom. His study focused on one community college that altered the students' classroom learning experiences through the use of "learning communities and the adoption of collaborative learning strategies" (p. 600), and how those learning experiences affected persistence. He found that the students who were a part of the learning communities persisted at a higher rate than those who were not. He also learned from the participants how supportive peer groups and gaining a voice in the construction of knowledge impacted their learning and their persistence. In my opinion, however, what he did not emphasize enough was that it was the unifying theme of "having a voice in the construction of knowledge" that made the real difference to the students in the learning community. Had there been a different unifying theme for the learning community, such as having all the different classes tie together by studying the same time period in history, the impact of the learning community on persistence would not have had the same impact.

From this study, Tinto also concluded that classroom learning experiences bridge the gap between academic and social integration. He posited that participating in the learning communities in the classroom provided "important linkages to membership in communities external to the classroom" (p. 616). Twenty-two years after Tinto's 1975 student integration model, he still believes in the importance of integrating into the social

communities of the institution. In my study, I found that social integration is an extremely important factor, but only within the students' program of study. Extending social integration out into the communities of the institution beyond the classroom was not a necessary component of persistence.

My findings concerning classroom experiences are in line with the part of Tinto's 1993 modified theory of student persistence which posits that institutional experiences in classes, labs, and studios play an important role in student persistence. However, Tinto's discussion of the classroom is overly simplistic, as he only examined the classroom as it relates to student learning and how particular teaching practices can have an effect on persistence. The experiences of my participants placed great emphasis on the importance of the classroom, but not just with a focus on how teaching and learning affect persistence. There was also an emphasis on the overall atmosphere in the classroom and how the dynamic between faculty and students had an impact on both learning and persistence as well. Participants shared how the individuals in the classroom, both teachers and peers, as well as the happenings in the classroom, affected persistence.

"One assumption of the theory of student persistence in commuter colleges and universities is that commuter students frequently have obligations distinct from attending college" (Braxton et al., 2014, p. 129). My findings are contradictory to theories that place great emphasis on external factors and predict dropout because of the distractions and other obligations that community college students have outside the college environment. This is not to say that community college students don't often have to juggle attending classes, completing outside of class assignments, working while also

going to college, and family obligations, but when those students are supported with empathy and with care, the need for such intense focus on external factors fades away, and brings the focus back on the relationships among the individuals in the classrooms and within the department.

Most retention studies place great emphasis on the need for many varied types of support for students, and support was indeed an important factor in the persistence of my participants as well. However, the multiplicity of support showed deeper and more complex aspects of support than what is typically discussed in the current research concerning the most prevalent types of support, i.e., academic, social, and financial support (Braxton et al., 2014; Tinto, 2012). For example, peer support for my participants went far beyond Tinto's study of the classroom as a learning community. In Tinto's study peer support included the creation of a supportive network of friends, which included the making and diversifying of friendships and having a network of peers to study with outside the classroom (Tinto, 1997). In Tinto's study these individuals experienced peer support because of the connections that were made by being enrolled in the learning community. In my study, many of the students in the graphic design learning community went one step further and strategically scheduled all of their other classes, (the general education classes that take place outside of the graphic design learning community) together with some of their graphic design classmates to continue having peer support that extended beyond the graphic design classes. There were also additional friendships that were formed with the students from the graphic design class that was a year ahead of the participants—the students that were in the second year of the program. In these

instances, first year and second year students didn't actually take any classes together. These were friendships that were built within the department and gave second year students the opportunity to support first year students. In these scenarios first- and second-year students might be working on their own individual projects, but were in the computer labs at the same time, or participating in departmental club events on campus, or going on field trips with the students and faculty members in the graphic design department, and this all fostered relationship building. These friendships existed within the department and the participants learned from the previous experiences of other students in the program that had gone before them. This sometimes helped first year students with the transition into the graphic design program and from one semester to the next. In addition, because the AGD Department only hires recent graduates of the graphic design department as lab techs, relationships are built with these individuals as well. The lab techs have gone through the exact same program, and can share their experiences as well as their knowledge of the curriculum. They also assist the students in learning the software applications, and help them understand the AGD program and processes as a whole. Because the lab techs are closer in age to the students than the faculty members are to the students, the lab techs are viewed more often as peers, but peers with more experience and knowledge about the processes that the current students are working through, which sometimes makes the students more comfortable in asking the lab techs questions or discussing their concerns.

Ironically, when academic support is discussed in the literature, teacher support is rarely mentioned. Academic support is typically addressed in the forms of basic skills,

developmental courses and tutoring and these types of support are seen as critical for student success. Actual teacher support was very important in my study and was experienced in a variety of ways. Sometimes teacher support was perceived as the small and expected things like advising students and being knowledgeable about the content taught. However, the participants in this study also spoke to instances of teachers pushing them to excel, lending a helping hand, and going out of their way to help them if they had questions or didn't understand the material, even going so far as helping them find solutions when distractions outside the college environment were affecting their persistence. The participants felt that their college teachers were encouraging, and were understanding of the challenges that they faced outside the classroom, and that their teachers genuinely cared not only about their success in the program, but also about the participants as individuals as well.

Having the support of peers and of teachers, however, only partially explained the multiplicity of support experienced by the participants. The most extremely different instance of support in my study that is not found in the existing literature was the combination of teacher and peer support that gave the participants a feeling of the department being their second home, a place where students actually considered their classmates and their teachers in the graphic design program as part of their extended family.

Braxton et al. (2014) posit the support of significant others as having an important influence on the persistence of commuter students. However, the biggest difference in this study and the extant literature concerning family support was who the participants

considered family. Many of the participants defined family as the connectedness of the teachers and students and the relationships that they experienced in the AGD department, using language such as “friend family,” “family like unit,” “like a family,” “GRD family” and “feeling at home.” For these participants, family support did not just include immediate family members, but family was defined as the familial ties between both the students and the faculty members.

Having a voice in the construction of knowledge was also found to be important in my study, but how empowering that voice can in a student’s life outside the classroom was not addressed in Tinto’s 1997 study. Freire (1998) states, “To teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge” (p. 30). To teach is much more than simply filling our students’ heads with content, asking them to regurgitate the information that they have received and then judging their success based on their test scores. If we accept this “banking method” of education, we are doing a huge disservice to our students and to teachers alike. Freire (1998) believes,

Intellectuals who memorize everything, reading for hours on end, slaves to the text, fearful of taking a risk, speaking as if they were reciting from memory, fail to make any concrete connections between what they have read and what is happening in the world, the country, or the local community. They repeat what they have read with precision but rarely teach anything of personal value. (p. 34)

Many of the participants complained during the interviews about teachers that used the banking method of educating, but in terms of too much textbook or not having the freedom to express their opinions or never being able to have any class discussions that were relevant to their life. In contrast, they described how they had a voice in the

construction of knowledge through graphic design projects when they were given the creative freedom to choose their topic or subject matter. They also talked about how they learned through the class critiques of their projects. Putting a personal spin on their work and being required to voice their own opinions, as well as listening to the opinions of others about their work, helped them learn and advance their thinking. One participant noted that having creative freedom and having instructors and classmates who were open minded and not restricted by social norms actually helped him think outside the box, and allowed him to be more creative, which he said assisted him both academically and personally. Another participant said that she believed she actually became smarter because she was given the freedom to express her ideas. Because she was able to see herself in her work and because she never feared that she would be told her ideas were dumb, she was able to learn through self-expression and constructive criticism. The more her work and her ideas were discussed, the more she felt she learned. Looking at this on a broader scale, Villaverde (1998) asserts that

art demands that the individual become more intrinsically involved with the idea, process, and execution of the artwork. Art, which is said to reflect social life, is better characterized as a process of being, a dialectic where the knower's personal participation in the events and the emotional insight gained from such participation moves us to a new dimension of knowing. (p. 197)

In addition to having creative freedom, there was another very important aspect of freedom that the participants experienced. The participants felt that they had the freedom to be able to express themselves as individuals and that they were accepted by both the faculty members and students in the department and were therefore comfortable in their

own skin in the classroom environment. You may recall Wally's discussion of the inclusive culture he experienced in the AGD program and I think his assessment is worth repeating here. He stated,

I've seen so many different types of personalities in this program. I don't think that anyone particularly fits in this program. I think this program is a great program for the reason that you don't have to fit in. You don't have to conform into this person to be accepted here. Everybody here has their own opinions. Everybody believes in different ways. Everybody views themselves in different ways but it's widely accepted in this program.

Erikson (1968) posits that identity formation is characterized by simultaneous reflection upon self and observation of communal culture. He states, "In psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him" (p. 22). Educational institutions can be extremely oppressive environments if students are not allowed to express themselves, and if they feel that they have to conceal their identities in the classroom.

The last aspect of persistence often overlooked in the literature concerns the voices of the students in relationship to the complexity of learning. The participants in this study were very specific as to the types of teaching practices they felt they needed in order to be successful. Catering to specific learning styles and not relying too much on the textbook were key components. In addition, the importance of engaging students in the learning process and having fun while learning was paramount. Too often we as educators and administrators do not listen to the voices of the students when it comes to

their needs. It is unusual to find the actual voices of students in the persistence literature, which is odd since we can learn so much from their actual experiences. Many researchers studying persistence don't seem to listen to the voices of educators very often either, which is surprising since students and educators are the two entities that can enlighten researchers through their experiences and add greatly to the understanding of persistence.

Concluding, most persistence theories prior to this decade attempt to explain student attrition, while my study focused on why students persist. Even Tinto has moved away from looking at why students leave and has begun to focus more on why students stay. However, Tinto (2012) has decidedly moved away from theory building. He states in his latest book that he “does not seek to develop a theory of effective institutional action or to propose additional research on student success” (p. viii). Rather he “lays out a framework for institutional action and describes the types of actions and policies that institutions can take to enhance student retention and completion (p. viii). On the other hand, I have created a theory about persistence, which I theorize as *a culture of persistence*. See Figure 7.

Theory of A Culture of Persistence

A culture of persistence is the central phenomenon that was discovered when theorizing about the interconnectivity of the four main categories or causal conditions. As you can see from the nested spheres there are complex and interwoven ways in which the experiences in the classroom shape persistence. When the participants experienced these conditions in the classroom environment, the overlapping of the interactions associated with each of the four main categories caused the creation of *a culture of persistence*.

Unlike most theories on persistence, this theory places almost all the emphasis on what happens inside the classrooms and/or within the department of the student's program of study. The theory includes all the individuals that coexist within the AGD program.

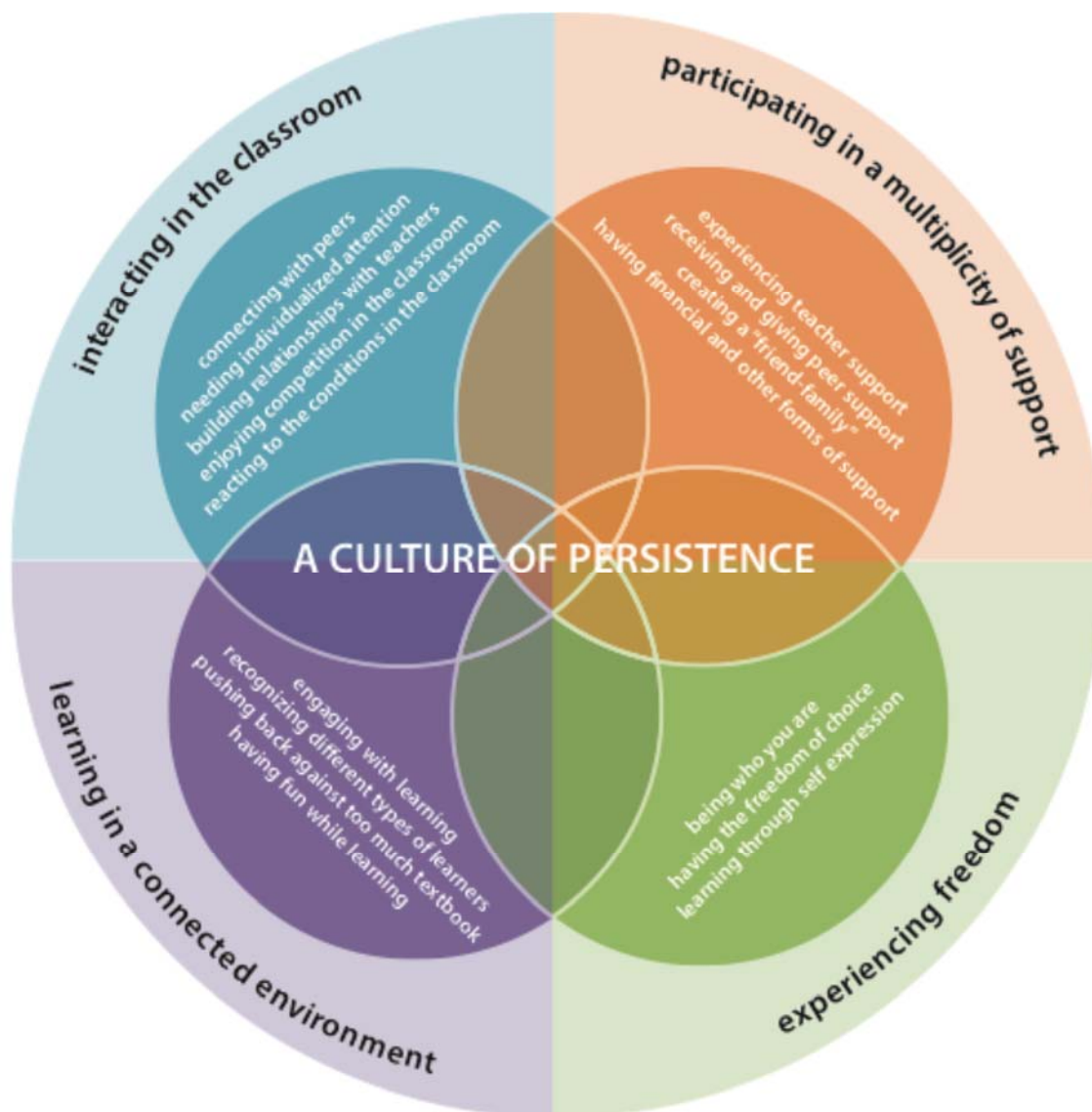


Figure 7. Theoretical Model of A Culture of Persistence.

In most existing persistence theories, there is an assumption that there are complex conditions that affect the persistence of an individual. All of those varied factors can have a positive or a negative effect on the persistence of the student, but the majority of those forces are seen as existing outside the classroom, or do not recognize or acknowledge the power that a teacher exerts within the classroom. The conditions that create *a culture of persistence* come from the interactions and relationships that take place inside the classroom, the participatory stance concerning support, learning in a connected environment, and the freedom that was experienced in the classroom.

The word “culture” in *a culture of persistence* is understood as the “shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization. These shared patterns identify the members of a cultural group while also distinguishing those of another group” (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition [CARLA], 2015, para. 1). Therefore, the faculty and students together in the AGD Dept. have created a unique culture—*a culture of persistence*, which is a counter-culture to what Delpit (1988) calls “the culture of power” that exists in our educational institutions. She explains the five aspects of power as follows:

(1) issues of power are enacted in classrooms, (2) there are codes or rules for participating in the culture of power, (3) the rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power, (4) if you are already not a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier and (5) those with the power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. (p. 282)

According to Delpit (1988) issues of power in the classroom extend from a teacher's power over the students, the power of textbook publishers and curriculum developers to determine the worldview of the classroom and the impact of those with power to determine another's intelligence and/or to decide what's normal. Each one of the participants in this study was very conscious of the power that teachers have over their students, and explained how that power was so problematic in their high school experiences that it caused the majority of the participants to leave and find alternative routes to regaining their education.

In opposition to the norm, the faculty members in the AGD program are very conscious of the power dynamics that form a hierarchical power structure and recognize that this dichotomy has negative consequences for students. Respecting the unique culture that each individual brings to the class and encouraging each individual's ideas created an educational culture that was drastically different than "the culture of power" that most of the participants experienced in high school. When the participants felt that their individual identities were respected and that the students were on an equal footing with their instructors, this experience made a huge difference in their desire to be in the classroom and their want to persist.

Persistence is defined as a "firm or obstinate continuance in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). Persistence therefore is typically thought of in a very intrinsic way as the sum total of all of the processes taken on by an individual to achieve a goal. However, persistence in relationship to both the

individuals and the happenings that the participants experienced in the classroom became less of an individualized determination, and was experienced in a more communal way.

A culture of persistence views persistence in a broader context and begins with the interactions within the classroom environment as a causal condition. The classroom is where the students begin the process of persisting, where they receive individualized attention, react to the conditions in the classroom, begin to feel more like equals with their teachers and learn that their teachers care about them as individuals. In the classroom, the students begin to build relationships with their teachers and make connections with their peers. The students are both challenged and rewarded academically through the healthy competition in the classroom. Through these interactions the teachers and the students become less of a dichotomy and more of a community. hooks (1994) believes in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor we must build community. She enters the classroom with the assumption that “a feeling of community creates a sense that there is shared commitment and common good that binds us. What we all ideally share is the desire to learn—to receive actively knowledge that enhances our intellectual development and our capacity to live more fully in the world” (p. 40).

Support is quite likely understood as a condition that would assist students in persisting to the point of graduation. However, in this study peer support was experienced as more than just receiving support. Support was reciprocal and therefore support was not only received by the participants, but also given. In addition, the participants experienced varied types of teacher support and the participants also experienced other types of

external support in varying ways. The multiplicity of support that was experienced by the participants elevated the community of its participants, both teachers and students, to the level of being a family and many participants felt as if their college classroom was their second home. The students felt that they had each other's back and persistence became more of a group endeavor.

Noddings (1995) posits that individuals will not achieve success unless they believe they are cared for and learn to care for others. She asserts that teachers should invest the time to develop trusting relationships with students, dialogue with them “about problems that are central to their lives, and guide them toward greater sensitivity and competence across all domains of care” (Noddings, 1995, p. 5).

Another complementary condition concerning the idea of persistence as a group or team effort is relative to the idea of a connected environment, and in this case, a connected learning environment. All of the participants in this study considered themselves to be either a visual learner or a combination of both visual and kinesthetic. This way of understanding and communicating created a connection among the students, and also among the students and their teachers, because all of the teachers in this department are visual learners or a combination of visual and kinesthetic, just like the participants. This created a shared language that assisted in the teachers being able to better communicate with the students, and vice versa. This shared language and boost in communication assisted the students in gaining more confidence in their abilities, as they began to understand concepts more easily when being taught in a manner that catered to their learning preference. While their learning style might not have been catered to in the

general education classes that they took outside the department, the confidence that was gained in their own ability to succeed assisted them in persevering, even if circumstances were found to be challenging.

Overall the participants described their graphic design classes as engaging and fun. While one might not typically think of fun being an action that enables one to persist, when someone enjoys what he or she is doing, and is engaged in that process, the majority of these individuals want to keep doing it, despite difficulty or opposition. Brooks (2016) posits that people can withstand a great deal when they are motivated by “some truth or mission or love” (p. 15). hooks (2010) emphasized love as a guiding principle of an emancipatory education. She believes, “Love in the classroom creates a foundation for learning that embraces and empowers everyone” (p. 159).

The last condition that created *a culture of persistence* is the freedom that the individuals experienced in the classroom. Several of the participants mentioned how having a voice in the construction of knowledge helped them learn, helped them retain information better, and made the class more interesting. I recognize that graphic design as a curriculum is more amenable to students being able to express themselves and gaining a voice in the construction of knowledge. However, graphic design, unlike fine art, is not art for the purpose of self-expression. Graphic design is a form of visual communication and the appropriate message must be communicated to a specific target audience or the work is not considered successful, and students must always be judged against this criterion.

For example, in Graphic Design I, I teach students the principles of design. Students learn to use balance, emphasis, rhythm, unity, and composition in the creation of a Public Service Announcement through the creation of a poster. The students are required to choose either their favorite name brand shoe or article of clothing, research the company, and focus on the company's production practices and how those practices affect others. The students then design the poster in the current advertising style of the company they researched, but the headline should be an unexpected surprise and speak to corporate harm reduction. Students are critiqued and graded on their ability to create well-designed poster solutions based on their appropriate application of the design principles and whether or not the student communicated an appropriate message based on his or her research. These projects are presented in a way that makes students more knowledgeable about the injustices happening in the world, enables them to recognize their ability as graphic designers to make change, and ideally inspires them enough to speak out on issues that affect their lives and the lives of others.

In any subject or curriculum, there are always small openings that allow educators the flexibility to give their students opportunities to express themselves. Case in point, having a voice in the construction of knowledge was not just experienced in their graphic design classes, but in some of their general education classes as well, especially their English and sociology classes, where the participants were encouraged to connect personal experiences to class content.

The freedom to be who you are and the freedom to express oneself had a major impact on many of the participants' persistence in and completion of the program. The

participants liked being able to express themselves and believed that adding a personal component helped them learn, helped them better retain information, and made their educational experience enjoyable and memorable, even emancipatory.

Moreover, learning should not merely teach facts, skills, and critical thinking. It must speak to the hearts, minds, and spirits of each individual. Shapiro (2006) posits that education must be committed to creating the “moral and emotional climate that might guide young people in their struggle to build lives of purposeful commitment in a world, that for better or worse, is their home” (Shapiro, 2006, p. 121).

We—the researcher and the participants—using a faculty and student centered approach, believe that the four causal conditions —interacting in the classroom, participating in a multiplicity of support, learning in a connected environment, and experiencing freedom—create *a culture of persistence* where persistence is viewed not as much as an individualized process, but more so as a community endeavor. This theory also gives explanation for the complex ways in which the conditions of the classroom shape both persistence and learning.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the data that I collected and the data analysis process that I used to formulate a grounded theory. The participants’ stories were analyzed and organized using a constructivist grounded theory coding approach. I identified and discussed the interrelatedness of the four main categories and showed, as evidenced by the participant’s quotes, how each category earned its way into the substantive grounded theory. The substantive theory that emerged from the data was grounded in the

participants' experiences and depicts *a culture of persistence* as the central phenomenon that was experienced by the participants.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

Overview

While nearly 60 million Americans leave high school, almost 20 million of those individuals will earn a GED certificate (Long & Mullin, 2014), and approximately half of all GED holders will eventually enroll in postsecondary education (Garvey & Grobe, 2011). The problem however is that traditional high school graduates complete almost two and a half more years of postsecondary education compared to GED earners (Murnane et al., 2000). In the latest study conducted by the GED Testing Service researchers, the percentage of GED earners who enrolled in postsecondary education programs and completed them within six years has only increased from between 0.5 and 3% (Tyler, 2001) to 12% (Zhang et al., 2011). Additionally, President Barack Obama's call to increase the number of adults with college degrees by the year 2020 has increased the enrollment of GED earners who enter postsecondary education. In my program, the number of GED earners enrolled has increased from one in 2001 to seven in 2016. Because of the increase in the number of GED earners entering the community college, and their extremely low persistence rates nationally, I felt it was critical to focus on this population of students.

The purpose of this study was to better understand under what conditions degree attainment takes place for GED recipients enrolled in a graphic design program and to

determine which experiences these participants believe led to degree attainment. Therefore, the overarching research question that guided this study was, “What conditions and experiences lead to associate degree attainment for GED earners enrolled in a graphic design program in one particular community college?” To generate a theory on the conditions and experiences of GED earners, I interviewed 13 participants who earned their associate degree. Their stories were analyzed through the data analysis process used in a constructivist grounded theory study. My hope is that the substantive theory generated by my research will assist community college educators and administrators in better understanding and supporting GED earners throughout their educational endeavors.

A culture of persistence is the central phenomenon that was discovered when theorizing about the interconnectivity of the four main categories or causal conditions found in the data. The four main causal conditions are (a) *interacting in the classroom*, (b) *participating in a multiplicity of support*, (c) *learning in a connected environment*, and (d) *experiencing freedom*. Persistence is a process, and, as such, needs to be considered in its interconnectedness. These findings highlight the complex and interwoven ways in which the experiences in the classroom shape persistence. Being a part of the overlapping interactions associated with each of the four main categories caused the creation of *a culture of persistence*. The participants felt this type of environment was necessary and aided in their completion of the program.

Five of the 13 participants shared with me their concluding thoughts concerning the applicability of the theoretical model of *a culture of persistence* to their experiences.

Some participants shared more than others. Allen shared that he thought the theory was awesome. Jose noted that he felt engaging students in the learning process and having fun while learning was very important and that he is more successful in an environment that reflects a “culture of persistence” where everyone is involved and accountable for what and how they learn, versus a “culture of power” where the one with the power decides what and how students learn. Some of the other participants who offered feedback gave a bit more detail concerning their thoughts on the theoretical model. Kat shared,

After reading about a culture of persistence, I completely agree with the statements that have been made. It was very interesting to see how our experiences were related to the different theories. Hook’s beliefs are dead on. The program you have created allows all students to not only learn, but to feel at home. That speaks volumes to students and some people do not realize how important that can be. It only takes one experience to change a person’s life and the AGD program provides the opportunity for that experience to happen. Everyone that has come through the program and given it a real chance would agree. This was well written and you did a wonderful job with the comparisons. I believe you covered everything that needed to be addressed and it was still easy to relate to. It was an honor to be a part of this with you and we are all so proud of you.

Zach stated that he agreed with the theory and noted the following:

If I didn’t have those fundamental learning tools of freedom of expression, PCC feeling like a second family or home that was created for me, and creating connections to events and relevance in my own life that were developed in the classroom, then I do not feel I would have been as successful completing my degree. The feeling of support from my teachers and peers also gave me confidence to do well in other classes outside of just design classes and outside of the college too.

Rachel took the opposite approach and spoke to the theory as a measure of what was missing in her university experience:

Interestingly, I didn't realize it until I read those chapters, that's why I'm not feeling this program. Everything is separated. I am separated from my teachers (even though we call them by their first names we're still at arm's length with them). We are separated from our peers because for whatever reason this program/field of study either produces sweet accepting students or mean judgmental ones. We are never told we are doing well or given encouragement by our professors/instructors except for one in specific. I got encouragement from her but you can tell they're too busy to give you that. We're definitely NOT connected. That's a definite. I've already heard from four other students how they're always considering dropping this program.

Leigh believed that her experience with higher education coincided with the theory. She stated,

The theory itself is very thorough and covers all major factors that I feel contributed to my persistence in achieving/completing my higher education degree. Your description of the classes and environment of the AGD program matches my memory of my time there. I don't know if there is anything more that I would add to your theory. I feel like you used our interview material correctly and reached a conclusion that I agree with. Good work and good luck!

The last statement, which is from Wally, is not feedback on the theory per se, but something that he posted on Facebook the day before my oral defense. However, I feel that his statement is a very powerful testament to his experience in *a culture of persistence* in the Advertising & Graphic Design Department at PCC and reveals how such an experience can not only be emancipating, but also extend way beyond the confines of the classroom.

Never in a million years did I think that I would be going for a Bachelor's degree . . . I'm not a classroom type of guy, but I know what I wanna do with my life and I know what it's going to take for me to get there! I'm determined to be great!! Tomorrow marks a new chapter in my life . . . I've balanced work and school well enough to obtain my first degree and now God has blessed me with two jobs!! I

know it's going to be tough trying to balance school and two jobs but I have so much faith in me!!!

Limitations of the Study

Since this is a qualitative study, it was not my intent to produce generalizations. Generalizations are important in quantitative research where random sampling is used to select a “large, statistically representative sample from which generalizations can be made” (Glesne, 2015, p. 50). Because only 13 GED earners participated in this study, instead of producing generalizations, my intention as a qualitative researcher was to enhance transferability by providing information about the researcher and the research context, participants, and researcher/participant relationships. Transferability does not involve broad claims, but invites the reader to make connections between aspects of the study and their own experiences (Colorado State University, 2016).

One of the limitations of this study is that only students who earned their associate degree were interviewed. Therefore, the findings came from a focus that was solely on the conditions and experiences of GED earners who were successful in obtaining the associate degree.

I also recognize the possibility that I, as both the researcher of this study and the head of the department in which these participants were enrolled, may have had an influence on what participants shared. However, I believe that all of the participants answered the questions openly and honestly during the interviews. The participants were cooperative and candid, and they offered great insights as they shared information about their educational experiences.

Suggestions for Future Research

I suggest because there is a plethora of research on the barriers that exist outside the classroom, that future studies continue to focus on the experiences inside the classroom, which are lacking in the current literature on persistence. I would also like to see if this theory holds true for other associate of applied science programs in both this community college and others.

GED earners are marginalized in the literature on persistence, as are the community colleges they attend. At the same time, we are learning that not only are more and more GED earners desiring postsecondary education, but that they will most often begin their educational endeavors in the community college (Boesel et al., 1998). Therefore, additional research focusing on GED students in the community college system is critical. “The loss of tuition dollars due to GED dropouts over a three-year period is more than \$1,600,000,000” (Long & Mullin, 2014, p. 140). Institutions are losing a substantial amount of money, but at the same time are not addressing this population of learners.

Implications for Practice

Findings from this study have practical implications for those who wish to foster the success of GED earners enrolled in the community college system. Based on the findings I suggest a number of imperatives for both administrators and educators. While these imperatives are particular to the GED students that participated in this study, I feel that these same imperatives can be applied to *all* students in the community college system in general, not just GED students specifically.

State leaders and policymakers play a key role in persistence and retention. However, “all states are struggling due to the Great Recession, and state budgets show continued weakness (National Governors Association and National Association of State Budget Officers, 2012)” (Braxton et al., 2014, p. 14). This means there will be no new money for state efforts to improve completion rates (Braxton et al., 2014). The community college is primarily funded on the basis of enrollment numbers and performance, meaning retention and completion. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the community college to retain students until the point of graduation. Without any additional funding to assist, however, the responsibility concerning the retention and completion of students falls primarily on the shoulders of faculty and support staff.

Higher education administrators, faculty members, and researchers all recognize that persistence is a complex process, but the majority of attention focuses on the happenings outside the classroom. This study reveals that more attention needs to be directed towards the happenings inside the classroom. Therefore, it will be important to listen to both faculty and students as they are the ones experiencing this process together. This body of research is a combination of just that, the voices of students and myself as a faculty member, department chair and researcher. However, *a culture of persistence* has only been recognized at the department level and will need to be further researched and developed to create *a culture of persistence* for an entire institution.

Imperatives

I will now discuss the four imperatives that stem from both the experiences of the participants and the four conditions, which I theorize create *a culture of persistence*:

Imperative #1: Interacting in the Classroom

Make use of learning communities, challenge and support students, and encourage the building of relationships between faculty and students and students and their peers.

Learning communities are created by the block scheduling of courses in that the same cohort of students take their courses together, usually with a unifying theme that runs through all of the different courses. In the associate of applied science programs, the unifying theme would most likely tie to the major. For example, in the Advertising & Graphic Design program, creativity and communication is the unifying theme. Learning communities foster collaborative learning strategies and make room for the student voice in the construction of knowledge (Tinto, 1997).

Learning communities in the associate of applied science programs have been around for a very long time, most likely since the birth of the community college in the early 1900's. However, how learning communities positively affect persistence has only been recognized in the research in the last two decades. This is most likely due to researchers avoiding the study of the community college and its students. Regardless, as of late, the most prominent theorists studying departure and persistence have shown that learning communities positively affect persistence (Braxton et al., 2014; Braxton et al., 2000; Tinto, 1997, 2012).

In learning communities, an appropriate balance of support and challenge is also needed and necessary for learning and growth. Environments that are weighted too heavily in one direction are problematic. Too much challenge without support leads to

angst, and too much support without challenge leads to boredom. A balance of the two creates engagement, while an imbalance creates withdrawal. The relationships between faculty and students and students and their peers that evolve through this process is an extremely important outcome that stems from this environment. If these important relationships do not emerge, the learning community will not have the same effect on persistence.

Imperative #2: Participating in a Multiplicity of Support

Provide support for the idea and understanding that there are existing systems of power and privilege that advantage some and disadvantage others. Promote equity in the classroom by making decisions and providing resources that are based upon the needs of each individual. Build supportive relationships that create a culture of care that embraces each student's unique cultural identity and build a family-like atmosphere that provides both challenging and supportive learning environments while also exhibiting concern for each individual's personal welfare. Create opportunities to build a community of support among students that promotes the giving of support as much as the receiving.

The number one factor when discussing persistence is the need for support. However, the majority of support in the literature on persistence is seen as support systems that exist outside the classroom environment. In this study while participants did experience varied forms of support that existed outside the classroom, the types of support that had the biggest impact on the persistence of the participants existed within the classroom.

Imperative #3: Learning in a Connected Environment

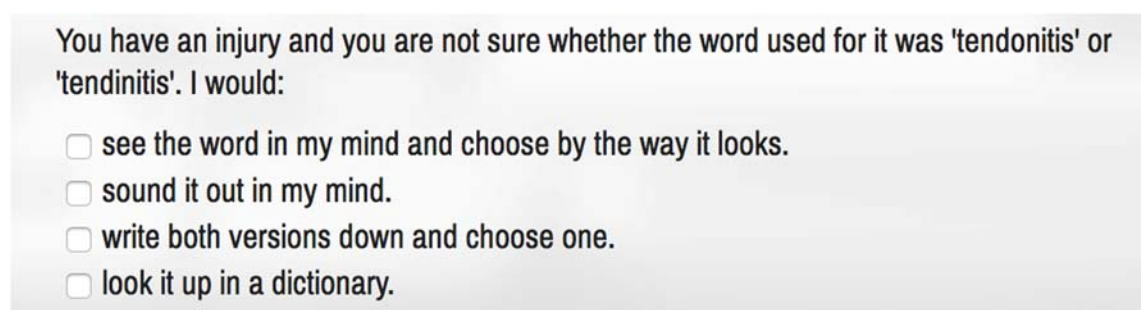
Enroll students in classes based on their learning preferences as these similarities in the ways students learn and communicate create a connectedness among students and faculty while also strengthening communication. This approach should simultaneously foster the creation of an engaging learning environment where both teachers and students have a voice in the construction of knowledge. Never forget, in addition to rigor, learning should be both critical and fun.

The importance of student engagement and involvement is a pretty well-known common sense aspect of persistence that is often addressed in the literature on persistence. When an individual is having fun doing something, and is engaged or involved in that process, most often (s)he wants to keep doing it, despite difficulty or opposition, which means (s)he is involved and is persisting in that process.

Where I go out on a limb is how connectedness is experienced through shared learning styles and how I believe that this can also assist in persistence. By grouping students who share the same ways of processing information and learning, a common language is spoken which heightens communication, understanding and connectedness. I would even go so far as to suggest, that in addition to placement tests that assess students' skills in math and English, that placement questionnaires also be administered that assess students' learning preferences, and students would then be placed in classes based on their preferred style of learning. These questionnaires help both teachers and students think more about the way individuals learn.

An assessment tool, VARK, which is an acronym for Visual, Aural, Read/write and Kinesthetic currently exists and was created by Fleming and Baume (2006) to evaluate learning preferences. These creators note, however, that the questionnaire is “technically, not a learning style questionnaire, as it provides feedback only on one’s preferred modes for communicating. These modal preferences for learning are only a small part of what most theorists would include in a complete package deserving to be called a ‘learning style’” (p. 1).

The VARK questionnaire and VARK materials are free for educational institutions and can be found online (<http://vark-learn.com/the-vark-questionnaire/>). The questionnaire is available in a number of different languages and there are four different versions: the standard VARK questionnaire, one that asks questions specific to teachers and trainers, one for young people, and one targeted specifically for athletes. In each case, the questions revolve around the particular interests of the targeted group. For example, one of the questions for athletes is as follows (see Figure 8):

A screenshot of a questionnaire question for athletes. The text is as follows:

You have an injury and you are not sure whether the word used for it was 'tendonitis' or 'tendinitis'. I would:

- ☐ see the word in my mind and choose by the way it looks.
- ☐ sound it out in my mind.
- ☐ write both versions down and choose one.
- ☐ look it up in a dictionary.

Figure 8. Sample Question for Athletes.

Respondents can choose more than one answer if a single answer does not match their perceptions and are told to leave blank any question that does not apply. The

purpose of creating the questions for particular target audiences is to encourage respondents to answer the questions based on their experiences versus hypothetical situations (Fleming & Baume, 2006).

I feel confident in making this suggestion, as I am one who has experienced heightened levels of understanding and learning when I was taught visually in comparison to being completely lost and frustrated when taught the same content aurally. However, I also realize immediately, because I have heard it directly, that some educators will say, “Well, there are some concepts that I teach that cannot be taught for example, in a visual manner.” My response is this. The focus is on communication. If you have a classroom of students that all learn and communicate in the same manner, as a group, it is more likely that the communication and understanding of concepts between students and teachers will be strengthened when the same forms of communication are needed by the group. If a teacher finds that the majority of her students do not understand a particular concept being taught, most often, teachers will figure out another way to communicate their ideas to their students. It is very rare that a teacher just gives up completely on teaching a concept when almost the entire class doesn’t get it. However, when only a few students don’t understand the material, that fact is either unrecognized because the student just gives up and doesn’t say anything, or the teacher decides to move on because the majority of students have grasped the concept. Therefore, I believe passionately that enrolling students in classes based on their learning preferences will aid in their persistence.

Imperative #4: Experiencing Freedom

Embrace multiculturalism by recognizing the value of each individual voice and allow students opportunities to express themselves through their course work. Educators should also be self-reflective and critical of their own beliefs, especially if they believe that a culture of equality currently exists in our postsecondary institutions.

Many educators and school leaders, even liberals, believe that a culture of equality currently exists in our institutions of higher learning. This misconception makes it extremely hard for individuals that experience racial and class divisions to escape the racism and oppression that is actually woven into the fabric of American culture and our educational systems. hooks (1994) suggests that the process of respecting cultural diversity requires individuals to become comfortable with being uncomfortable. She states, “Many folks found that as they tried to respect ‘cultural diversity’ they had to confront the limitations of their training and knowledge, as well as possible loss of ‘authority’” (hooks, 1994, p. 30).

Practicing freedom in the classroom makes a difference in students’ overall attitude about the system of education. Allowing students the freedom to express themselves and take pride in who they are as individuals makes a huge difference in how students feel about whether or not the institution and their teachers value them as individuals, and having the freedom to both speak and be heard, encourages students to have a voice in their learning. Persistence is often impacted by attitude and how students feel about what they are endeavoring to do. Therefore, a respectful environment that

values the differences in individuals and creates an inclusive culture for all students as active agents of their own learning undoubtedly encourages persistence.

Closing Thoughts

As both a faculty member and an administrator with almost two decades of experience in higher education, my work is mostly comprised of meeting the needs of students, especially those who have faced barriers along the way, GED students, visual learners, and those who are often viewed by society as being a little different from the norm.

A large part of my commitment to social justice in higher education originated in my experience as an outcast myself. If you recall, I mentioned earlier the struggles I had going through the system of education, especially high school. I often felt dumb and I struggled in school because my strengths were in visual arts, not in science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM). I was often unaccepted in many social circles and called racist names and not afforded certain opportunities because of dating interracial in high school. Therefore, I have always had a special place in my heart for others who have found it challenging to fit in certain places, and who also struggled in their educational endeavors along the way.

I have always strived to provide a learning environment for students, where their differences are encouraged and their different ways of learning, thinking, and seeing are supported, where they are made to feel that in opposition to what they've been told by some, they are not dumb, they are extremely smart and creative and talented, that they

have a great deal to offer and that they should embrace their differences and be confident in their abilities.

I believe that *a culture of persistence* where learning communities create positive relationships between faculty and students as well as students and their peers, where students are challenged and supported by their teachers and their classmates, where friendships flourish and connections are made, where learning is engaging, critical and fun, and where the differences in students are celebrated and opportunities are provided for self-expression, creates an environment that promotes persistence, where persistence is experienced as interactions of shared behaviors and communal ways of knowing by the group and not as an individualized journey where one gets to where (s)he is going alone.

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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT PROFILE CHART

PSEUDONAME	GENDER	RACE	ENTRANCE AGE	YEARS TO COMPLETE	GPA	PELL GRANT	FIRST GENERATION	REMEDIAL ENGLISH
ANDREW	M	C	19	4	3.4	No	No	No
JOSE	M	H	23	3	3.2	Yes	No	Yes (095)
ZACHARY	M	C	18	3	3.2	No	No	No
ALLEN	M	C	19	3	2.4	No	No	Yes (095)
LEIGH	F	C	21	2	3.7	No	No	Yes (095)
RACHEL	F	C	27	2	3.6	Yes	No	Transfer
KAT	F	C	22	2	3.5	Yes	No	Transfer
KEVIN	M	C	36	2	3.1	Yes	No	Transfer
JOSEPH	M	C	19	3	2.4	Yes	Yes	No
CAMILLE	F	AA	36	4	3.4	Yes	Yes	No
DEANDRE	M	AA	37	3	2.7	Yes	Yes	Yes (095)
LYNNE	F	C	21	2	3.8	Yes	No	No
WALLACE	M	AA	19	4	2.75	Yes	No	No

Codes

Gender: M=Male, F=Female

Race: AA=African American, C=Caucasian, H=Hispanic

Remedial English: Students can place into 075, 085, or 095

095 is only one remedial course needed before ENG 111 Expository Writing

Transfer: *If a student is listed as a transfer, they did not take any remedial courses at this institution, but could have at the previous institution they attended.*

APPENDIX B

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Project Title: Untold stories of degree attainment from GED earners in the community college

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor (if applicable): Eleanor Willard and Dr. Leila Villaverde

Participant's Name:

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

What is the study about?

This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. This study involves interview-based research and the purpose of the study is to better understand under what conditions educational persistence takes place for GED recipients. I would like to uncover which experiences relating to persistence lead to associate degree attainment by GED earners who were enrolled in the community college from their own perspectives.

Why are you asking me?

The reason you are being asked to participate in this study because you found an alternative approach to gaining your high school equivalency through the acquisition of a GED credential, and then in addition, earned an associate's degree from a community college.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?

Your honest and sincere reflections are important to this study. I would like to meet with you at a location of your choosing in order to ask you questions concerning your educational experiences. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions that I will ask you. I expect the interview to last approximately one hour. I intend to audiotape our interview so that I will have an accurate record of your words. In addition to the initial interview, I may ask to interview you a second, and possibly a third time if needed to gain additional information.

Is there any audio/video recording?

The interview will be audio-recorded, and the recording will be transcribed for the purpose of accuracy. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the audio-recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the audio files by storing them on a password protected iPad. As the audio is transcribed a

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fictitious name will be assigned to you on the transcript. Your real name will not be used at any point of information collection or in this dissertation study. At the end of the study, the recordings will be deleted.

What are the risks to me?

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. If any of the questions make you uncomfortable, you may choose not to respond. If you have any questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Eleanor Willard, Principal Investigator at (252) 902-7421 or Dr. Leila Villaverde, Faculty Advisor, who may be contacted at (336) 334-3475 or levillav@uncg.edu. If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-2521-2351.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?

The findings from this study may provide insight that can help the community college provide educational environments that may improve the academic success of GED earners in the community college system.

Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

How will you keep my information confidential?

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In order to ensure confidentiality, I will assign you a fictitious name on the transcript. Your real name will not be used at any point of information collection or in my dissertation. I will store all audio recordings at my home using a password-protected iPad. At the end of the study, all recordings will be erased/deleted. All transcripts will be stored on my password-protected laptop, separate from my iPad. A master link linking participant's names to their pseudonyms will be kept separate from the transcripts. This link will be stored on my password-protected laptop, separate from my password-protected iPad.

What if I want to leave the study?

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

What about new information/changes in the study?

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:

By participating in the interview you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By participating in the interview, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by Eleanor Willard.

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APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me a little about why you decided to get your GED versus a traditional high school diploma.
2. Tell me about your interactions with your high school teachers and classmates.
3. Describe the types of support you need as a student and whether you experienced that support in high school?
4. Describe how you felt after earning your GED.
5. What prompted your decision to enter higher education?
6. What is the educational level of your parents?
7. At what age did you enroll in postsecondary education?
8. What major did you choose and why?
9. Did you feel that you fit in your chosen program of study and what factors influenced this view?
10. Tell me about your relationships with your college teachers and classmates.
11. How much time did you spend in postsecondary education before completing your degree?
12. What do you feel were the major differences between your high school experience and your college experience?
13. What were the major contributing factors in the most successful periods of your college experience?
14. Describe your most memorable experience(s) in college.
15. Tell me about any campus organizations or clubs you belonged to.
16. Describe any periods during college that were stressful.
17. Who was your support person during your college experience?

18. Prior to attending college, what did you expect to experience as a college student?
19. Tell me about teaching approaches that did NOT work for you?
20. Think back through your entire educational journey, both high school and college. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?
21. What are you currently doing?
22. Are there any other questions you feel I should have asked?